

*Getting a life isn't always easy.
And hanging on to it is even harder...*



The Nothing Girl



Jodi Taylor

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by

Jodi Taylor

Jodi Taylor brings all her comic writing skills to this heart-warming tale of self-discovery.

Known as “The Nothing Girl” because of her severe stutter and chronically low self-confidence, Jenny Dove is only just prevented from ending it all by the sudden appearance of Thomas, a mystical golden horse only she can see. Under his guidance, Jenny unexpectedly acquires a husband – the charming and chaotic Russell Checkland – and for her, nothing will ever be the same again.

With over-protective relatives on one hand and the world's most erratic spouse on the other, Jenny needs to become Someone. And fast!

Fans of Jodi Taylor's best-selling Chronicles of St Mary's series will adore the quirky humour in this new, contemporary novel.

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Chapter One

As it turned out, I didn't kill myself after all. I don't mean I didn't try. In fact, I made all my preparations with the thoroughness of a thirteen-year-old girl whose teachers always commented on her 'thoroughness' because they couldn't think of anything else to say about her. I had carefully considered ways and means and made my choice.

I didn't go for the wrist-slitting. I think it was because of the mess. Someone would have to clear it up afterwards. I'd been brought up not to make a mess. Not to make a fuss. I know you can do that sort of thing in the bath but I really didn't want people seeing me with no clothes on, so paracetamol it was. I stockpiled, carefully camouflaging a packet here and a packet there amongst other, more innocuous purchases, not knowing when exactly, but pretty sure it would be soon.

And it was. The weekend followed the normal pattern. There was the usual Friday-night euphoria. School was finished. I had two whole days ahead of me when I didn't even have to think about it. Monday was an age away. I was happy; although happiness was, in my case, just an absence of misery. I woke on Saturday morning – no school. Yay! By Saturday afternoon, however, I was thinking – this time tomorrow I'll be nearly back at school again, and the darkness started to nibble at the corners of my mind.

On Sunday, my first thought was – I'm back at school tomorrow, and then the whole day was wasted in fearful anticipation of the following week. By Sunday night I was a little pile of misery in the corner of my bedroom.

And then the next day, of course, would be Monday.

But not any more. I'd had my last Monday. And Tuesday and Wednesday and all the rest of it. This was my last Sunday night. There would be no more Mondays.

I had a nice bath. I was quite calm. I thought I might be nervous, but knowing I wouldn't ever, ever have to face the world again gave me the quiet strength I needed. It was good to let go. I brushed my hair carefully, put on my favourite jeans and top, and sat back carefully against the pillows. I'd assembled everything I needed – because I'm thorough – water jug, glass, and three packets of paracetamol. There was no note. I wasn't interested in making people suffer. I did wonder, idly, how long it would take them to find me. When I didn't turn up at school tomorrow, would they simply assume I had another doctor's appointment and hadn't told them again? They never said anything, because they didn't want to be seen to be picking on the girl with the problems. If, of course, they could remember who I was. I wouldn't blame them if they couldn't. Sometimes even I had difficulty remembering me.

God knows when my family would miss me. Maybe when I started to

smell.

I hadn't bothered with a will either. Partly because I was only thirteen years old but mostly because my parents were dead and I lived with my uncle and aunt. My parents' money had come to me and now it would go to them. My uncle is a solicitor. I know these things. Not that they needed it. They weren't short of a bob or two themselves.

So there I was, all set to go. Possibly as a means of avoiding school it was a bit OTT – a sledgehammer to crack a walnut – but I couldn't do this any more. My road had not been very long, but it had been painful and I couldn't see it getting any better, so I was going now, before it got any worse. It seemed unlikely the world would miss me. Or even notice.

Years later, someone would call me a nothing girl. Admittedly, it was an emotional moment, with greed and hatred and betrayal ricocheting around the room and damaging everything in their path. But all those years ago, when I was only thirteen and still struggling to find my place in the world, before I even heard the phrase hurled at me, that's what I was.

The Nothing Girl.

I know now there are other people like me. People who, either accidentally or on purpose, fall through the cracks of life. And nobody notices. You call out and no one hears. You drown and people don't see. You're not being ignored because that implies they can see you in the first place. I'm talking about people like me – ghosts in their own lives. Hurting themselves just to check they're still alive.

I wiped away a tear and pulled out the foil blister packs, pressed out the first two tablets, and swallowed them down with a sip of water. I was about to take two more when, from nowhere, a voice said, *'I think two are enough, don't you?'*

I nearly fell off the bed in shock. I don't know what I thought. A mysteriously appeared Uncle Richard? A burglar? God?

Scrambling off the bed and scattering foil packets everywhere, I said, 'Who's there? Who are you?'

That was when I got my second big shock of the evening because I became aware, belatedly, that I was speaking normally.

This doesn't happen to me. I've got a stutter. A stupid thing. I had a little one as a child that came on if I was upset or frightened. After my parents died it got worse and worse, until it seemed I had to dredge words up from the very core of my being and every single word spoken depleted me somehow. And it was such hard work. And it took so long. At first people were sympathetic in various ways. They waited patiently for me to struggle through a sentence, which made me feel bad. Or they finished the sentence for me which made me feel worse. So I said less and less over the years and now I hardly said anything at all. I certainly didn't come out with: 'Who's there? Who are you?' without a huge amount of stammering and spluttering and all the massive effort my classmates find so mirth-provoking.

Strangely, I didn't feel that frightened. After all, I was in the process of taking my own life. How could it get any worse? I think I was more angry than scared. I'd worked my way up to this – this was the most important and probably the last act of my life and someone was telling me two paracetamol were sufficient, as if I just had a mild headache, instead of a life so unbearable that I didn't want to be in it any longer.

At this moment of high drama, as I stared into the shadowy corners of my bedroom, I became conscious of the smell of warm ginger biscuits. Well, I was only thirteen at the time. Biscuits played a large part in my life. Besides, the smell was familiar and reassuring.

I reached over to my bedside lamp and turned up the brightness. The small pool of light around my bed grew larger and brighter as the darkness retreated. Standing a safe distance away, over by the wardrobe, was an enormous golden horse.

A real horse. Not a picture or a projection. A very real, very solid, very large horse. In my head, I said, 'Are you a hallucination?'

'I think vision is a much nicer word, Jenny, don't you?'

'Are you a vision?'

'No.'

'Am I imagining you?'

'No.'

'Am I dead?'

'No.'

'What are you?'

He looked down at himself in surprise. *'I'm a horse!'*

We regarded each other for a while.

'Why are you here?'

'To be your friend.'

This seemed too good to be true and I refused to let myself believe it. Friends were not something I had.

'How did you get in here? Can horses climb stairs?'

'I can go anywhere you go. Because I'm your friend.'

I sat back down on the bed and stared at him. He was right. He was a horse. He was the most beautiful horse I'd ever seen. And certainly the biggest. He was golden and glowed slightly in the lamplight. His mane was long and cream, as was his gently swishing tail. His forelock hung between his ears, slightly obscuring a white star on his forehead and two very large, dark eyes.

He twitched his ears and shifted his weight slightly. I had a sudden vision of enormous piles of horse poo all over Aunt Julia's expensive gleaming wooden flooring.

He snorted. I got the impression he was laughing and it was funny, but I was still trying to get to grips with an enormous golden horse in my bedroom and a so-far-uncompleted suicide attempt. I was therefore actually feeling a little bit aggrieved at the interruption. Suicide is a big thing.

‘Why now?’

‘I think we both know the answer to that one.’

‘Have you come to stop me?’

‘I don’t have to,’ he said, calmly. He lowered his head and began to examine the contents of my bookcase.

‘Why don’t you have to stop me? You can’t, you know. I’m going to do this.’

He turned back from the bookcase. ‘No, you’re not.’

‘You can’t stop me,’ I said, trying not to sound petulant.

‘Jenny, let’s not start off with an argument. You can say anything you like to me. In fact, I wish you would. All I ask is that you’re truthful with me. If you lie to me then you’re lying to yourself.’

I was angry. ‘I want you to go away.’

‘No, you don’t.’

‘I do. Go away. You’re frightening me.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘I’ll call my uncle.’

‘And tell him – what?’

That stopped me. I’d already had more than my fair share of ‘doctor’s appointments’. The last thing I needed was to bounce downstairs announcing there was an enormous talking horse in my bedroom.

‘Jenny,’ he said, gently. ‘Pick up the packets and throw them all out of the window.’

‘No,’ I said, clutching them to me.

‘You’re not going to do this.’

‘I am. I am.’

‘No, you’re not.’

‘You don’t know that. How do you know that?’

‘Because you’ve done your homework.’

‘What?’

‘You’ve done your homework for Monday. It’s over there. An essay on Julius Caesar, two pages of German translation, and what looks like ... yes ... a page of simultaneous equations. You’ve got the second one wrong, but all the others are right. Well done.’

I stopped dead, wrestling with the implications. He was right. I had done my homework. Even though I’d planned to kill myself on Sunday night I’d done my homework for Monday. And now, as I looked around the room, I could see my stuff ready for Monday. My uniform would be hanging in the wardrobe. My shoes were cleaned and ready. I told you I was thorough. I tried to think about what this meant and ended by bursting into tears.

I heard him move across the room towards me. His breath was warm and comforting in my hair. I could smell ginger biscuits again. He stood between me and the door. My shield against the world.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, gently. ‘It really is all right, Jenny. You just wait

and see.'

I wiped my nose on my sleeve. 'Why are you here? Why me?'

I never forgot his reply.

'Because, Jenny, you're special.'

So that's how I met Thomas. I asked him his name and he said, '*Thomas*'. It was surely only a coincidence that that was the name I was thinking of at the time.

Five years later, I left school with good A levels; better than both my cousins certainly. In a perfect world, of course, Francesca would have had the beauty and Christopher would have had the brains. Well, the universe got it half right. Francesca was very beautiful. Christopher, sadly, had the brains of an earthworm and slightly less personality. He never got anything right. Even with tall parents and a tall sister, he managed to be well under average height. In a good-looking family, he was not only undistinguished but unmemorable. Ten minutes after he'd gone, you'd be hard pushed to remember what he looked like. He compensated by being obnoxious. The only talents he possessed were delusions of adequacy. He truly believed he was something special and even when various business affairs came crashing down around his head, as they invariably did, he was always unshakeably convinced it was everyone else's fault. So stupid was he that he'd managed to take Rushford's only bookshop and run it slowly into the ground. God knows what it cost Uncle Richard to keep him afloat. But he did. What Christopher wanted, Christopher got. Because on top of everything else, he was a cowardly, spiteful bully who delighted in tormenting those weaker than himself. And I should know. I remember, when I was a child, Russell Checkland had yanked him off me a couple of times.

And no one ever mentioned A levels and Francesca in the same sentence. She didn't need them.

They went on to have proper lives. Nothing happened to me for another fifteen years. After what Aunt Julia told me that day, I made sure I kept my head down and lived a gentle, uneventful life.

It happened when I tried to make a bid for freedom, picking my moment and then nervously showing my aunt a number of university brochures and pamphlets. She looked through them all very carefully, using the time to think of something to say. I did think it was because she was hurt that I wanted to leave home, but it was worse than that.

'Jenny, dear.' She stopped.

I took a deep, steadying breath, marshalling the words one by one like recalcitrant sheep. 'I ... like this one. Look at the History ... syllabus.'

'Of course, it didn't come out as smoothly as that, but typing my stutter would take for ever and reading it is even more irritating than listening to it. You just have to imagine it.

'Jenny,' she said again.

'You aren't ... looking at them.'

‘Jenny. I so hoped we wouldn’t have to have this conversation. I need you to listen to me very carefully. Naturally, your uncle and I were very pleased with your exam results. It’s nice to see you doing something well.’

Deep inside me, things began to clench. I could almost see my words flying free out of the window, leaving me far behind, never getting off the ground.

‘My dear, the thing is ... oh dear, this is so difficult. Jenny dear, you’ve lived with us a long while now and we hoped you would always continue to make your home with us.’

Behind me, Thomas breathed into my hair. I couldn’t see him but I knew he was there. He was always there for me. ‘*Be calm. Breathe slowly. Wait to see what she has to say first.*’

‘You see, some years ago, you remember, when we took you to see all those doctors and the thing is, well, they wanted you to go and live in – a special place – where they thought you would benefit from being with others like you.’

It came out in a rush. ‘Like me?’

‘Yes. You know we love you, Jenny. Your uncle and I, your cousins Christopher and Francesca, we’re your family. We know how difficult it is for you to – relate – to others. We tell people you’re quiet and shy, but it’s more than that. You know it is. We, your uncle and I, were quite horrified of course. There was no way we could ever let you go to a place like that. So your uncle spoke to them and they agreed, eventually, that if we could provide a quiet and secure environment for you, then that would suffice and you could continue to live with us. And it’s worked very well. You’ve remained quietly at home, gone to a normal school, and lived a normal life. But that’s the deal, Jenny. You have to live with us ... I’m so sorry, my dear, but you must see it’s for the best. You continue to live here, no stress, no pressure. You can have a lovely life as long as you stay here with us. You wouldn’t like the alternative at all. So you see, we can’t let you go to college. I’m so sorry.’

Behind me, Thomas said in a voice I’d never heard from him before. ‘*It’s very important that you stay calm. Pick up the leaflets, take your time, and sort them neatly. Put the large ones on the bottom and the smaller ones on the top. Do it now, please.*’

So I did. I was accustomed to being told what to do. I watched my hands carefully sorting the college stuff and concentrating on my breathing.

Aunt Julia hurried on. ‘I’m glad you’re taking this so well, Jenny. It just goes to show how well you function when you have a secure home environment behind you.’

I still said nothing, gently placing them on the coffee table.

‘I will speak to your uncle when he comes home tonight. I hope this hasn’t been too much of a shock for you.’

I sat back. The log jam of words and emotions began to subside. I looked at Aunt Julia, threw her a wobbly smile, and nodded.

‘I knew you’d understand. And I really don’t think student life is for you,

my dear. It can be very boisterous at times. You would find it very alarming. You know how shy you are.'

I nodded again. 'Now, you pop back to your room and I'll ask Mrs Finch to bring you up a nice cup of tea.'

Thomas and I trailed back to my room. I was frightened and trembling. I sat on my bed and rocked backwards and forwards. There was something the matter with me. I wasn't normal. They'd been going to put me in a home. They still might.

Three things came out of that particular conversation. Uncle Richard came to see me that evening with a suggestion that I study with the Open University. He spoke so kindly that I burst into tears again. He said it was a shame to waste such good exam results; that study suited me; that I was a clever little girl. He would get some course details for me to have a look through.

I stopped crying, gulped, and nodded.

'And, Jenny, if you're going to study on-line then you're going to need a really nice computer. Would you permit your aunt and I to give you a ... a... "good exam results" present? Would you like a new laptop?'

I nodded again.

He smiled, 'And, of course, you're going to need somewhere to study. Come with me a minute.'

We walked along the landing, opened the door, and climbed the attic stairs. There was a large attic, lit by three dormer windows. The floor was boarded and because it was part of Aunt Julia's domain and subject to her rules, there was no clutter and little dust. A few flattened cardboard boxes lay in one corner and that was it.

Thomas had followed us up. '*Oh yes,*' he said enthusiastically, wandering across to look out of the window. '*We could really do something with this. Bed here, bookshelves all across that wall, desk or table under the window, TV over there, rugs, artwork, the works. And your own bathroom in that corner over there.*'

'What?' I said, in my head. 'They'll never do all that.'

'*They're feeling guilty. Go for it while you can. I suspect you'll be spending a lot of time in here.*'

So I did. With Thomas prompting me from behind, I pretended I was Francesca and asked for everything I could think of. Neither Uncle Richard nor Aunt Julia argued or haggled. I got everything I wanted. A wonderful space, warm and full of light. Plenty of room for my books, a big table at which to work. I chose my favourite colours – no one argued. I thought I might get some grief from Aunt Julia who believed in the God of Colour Co-ordination but I had my own way in everything. Six months later, I had my own little palace.

Thomas was right, however. We spent a lot of time in my room. Fifteen years later and I was sick of the sight of it, so when Russell Checkland asked me to marry him, I said yes.

You can blame Thomas. I did.

I was alone in the house when the doorbell rang. Aunt Julia and Francesca were shopping. Even Mrs Finch was out.

'Well, answer it,' said Thomas, not moving from in front of the TV.

'Why me?'

'I'm a horse. I don't answer front doors.'

I sighed theatrically. *'Tell me what happens.'*

I puttered anxiously downstairs and was relieved to see it was only Daniel Palmer, Francesca's fiancé.

'Good evening,' he said cheerfully, stepping through the door. *'You do right to stay in out of all this rain, Jenny.'* Which was nice of him because I hadn't actually been asked on the shopping expedition. Or even known about it. *'Is Francesca back yet? I was supposed to pick her up ten minutes ago. Is she here?'*

I shook my head and gestured him through to the lounge. He wandered in, still chatting amiably, shaking the rain out of his greying hair and wiping his wet face on his sleeve. His thick coat made him look bulkier than he was, although he wasn't by any means fat. He wasn't actually that much older than Franny, although his deeply lined face and quiet manner made him appear so. And, I suspect, associating with Francesca on a regular basis was enough to age anyone prematurely. I liked Daniel Palmer. He actually talked *to* me and usually phrased his questions with yes/no options for reply.

And now the time has come to talk about that eternally interesting triangle: Daniel Palmer, Russell Checkland, and FrancescaKingdom.

I knew Russell from childhood. He, Francesca, and I were much of an age. Christopher was three years older and had his own set of equally unpleasant friends, so we never saw much of him. Actually, I didn't see much of Russell and Francesca either, but sometimes they allowed me to tag along for nearly ten minutes before they lost me.

Francesca was a pretty child who grew into a stunningly attractive woman. She has an enormous amount of dark red hair that curls exuberantly around her head, green eyes, and flawless, milk-white skin. She's tall, effortlessly slender, and graceful. She's got the brains of a teapot, but no one really cares, least of all Francesca. She's got all she needs to get by.

And get by she does. Not surprisingly, someone told her she could be a supermodel so that's what she decided she would be. She and Aunt Julia went up to London, engaged a stupendously expensive photographer, and sent her shots round to modelling agencies. She was, not surprisingly, picked up by the best and went off to make her fortune.

In London she again met Russell, who had been studying art, whose paintings were attracting considerable attention from those who mattered, and who was in London to make *his* fortune. It was, apparently, love at first sight and the rising young model with the promising future hooked up with the rising young artist with the promising future and they moved in together.

They were London's golden couple. One or other or both of them were always in the papers. It was a fairy-tale romance – he was tall too, he too had dark red hair, although his hung down over his forehead in what everyone assumed was a romantic poet-ish look. If ever two people had everything going for them it was those two. Their lives were stuffed with all the fame, fortune, prospects, and excitement that my own life lacked. I followed their doings in newspapers and magazines, never dreaming that one day I'd be part of the story.

Anyway, it was all going really well for them and then Francesca was offered a part in a new TV series. Some time ago a magazine had done a piece on her and her eccentricities – never wearing any colour but black, white, or green (this was sheer affectation; she looked stunning in every colour) and praising her unusual Renaissance-style beauty. This was seen by producer Daniel Palmer, who was looking for an actress to play a small part in his new TV series about the Borgias. That Francesca had no experience of acting seemed to bother no one, and actually all she had to do was look sinister, or mysterious, or lustful (often in that order, but sometime simultaneously) and occasionally utter a few words. The series was a huge hit. As was Francesca.

Russell meanwhile, looking for a centrepiece for his new show, hit on the idea of painting Franny in one of her Renaissance frocks. Arguably, it was the best thing he'd done to date. A besotted Daniel Palmer snapped it up. And Francesca as well.

Francesca, who had decided her future now lay with acting rather than modelling and possibly seeing Daniel as an easy way in, allowed herself to be snapped up. They disappeared over the horizon in a cloud of happiness and, in her case, ambition, and Russell Checkland woke one morning to find himself alone.

He took it badly. I don't know the details, I don't think anyone does. Twelve months later his deeply disapproving father yanked him back to Frogmorton, the dilapidated family home, paid his many debts, sobered him up, and packed him off into the army. Russell put up no sort of fight and allowed himself to be packed off.

There was no news of him for a couple of years, while Francesca's acting career was not quite the glittering success she hoped for either. She spent a lot of time at home. Aunt Julia said she was resting.

Then, suddenly, Russell Checkland was back, discharged from the army. He'd thumped someone: an NCO I think. I thought that was what the army was all about, but apparently you can't do that sort of thing if you're an officer.

So he was back in disgrace, and his father died three months later. Rumour said the two events were not unconnected. Daniel Palmer had to go abroad for a few months and Russell and Francesca were spotted eyeing each other hungrily one evening at a secluded pub out near Whittington.

Rushford enthusiastically resumed gossiping about its two favourite

gossipees and now that Daniel had just returned, everyone was waiting to see what would happen next.

I think Aunt Julia, in a refined and tasteful manner of course, and without raising her voice in any way, was tearing her hair out. What Daniel Palmer was thinking was anybody's guess.

Exciting, isn't it?

So, here was the apparently wronged fiancé sitting on Aunt Julia's couch, waiting for Francesca, who genuinely was out shopping with her mother. I was wondering what to do when Thomas strolled in.

'They all lived happily ever after,' he said, and it took me a minute to realise he was talking about the film and not the real-life drama currently being played out all over Rushford. *'Aren't you going to offer him some tea?'*

Daniel declined, much to my relief.

I got a tiny nudge in the small of my back. *'And make an effort.'*

Focus, breathe, and speak. '... Are you working on ... anything ... interesting at the moment?'

He waited while I got that out.

'Yes, I'm thinking about the Tudors. There's always plenty of material there. Do you think something about Elizabeth would go down well?'

I nodded.

'She's been done to death, of course. I'd need a fresh approach and I haven't really had the time recently to get my head around it. It's still on my "ideas" pile at the moment. What do you think?'

I nodded.

'No,' said Thomas. *'Find something to focus on, take two breaths, and speak again. You can do it.'*

I focused on the rose-patterned cushion, tracing the design with my eyes and edited my thoughts. 'Focus on relationship ... between Elizabeth and Mary. Introduce each episode ... as a game of chess. Elizabeth ... red queen. Mary white. Each queen introduces characters taking ... part. Outlines plot. First ... piece moves. Fade to normal action. At the ... end ... go back to chessboard and show new state of play in game ... including all the dead ... bodies or taken pieces lying on the board.'

I stopped, exhausted.

'Well done,' said Thomas. *'The sentences were a bit choppy, but otherwise not bad.'*

Daniel Palmer was smiling at me. 'That's an interesting concept. There's a lot going on in your head, isn't there? I'll give it some thought.'

'What's an interesting concept?' said Francesca, coming through the door laden with shopping bags. He jumped up to greet her and I forgot all about it.

'Oh, how nice for you,' she said mockingly, 'Jenny's been chatting to you.'

Did I forget to mention she's a bit of a cow as well?

'Yes, she's been keeping me very well entertained.' He was such a nice man. 'In fact, I nearly forgot my other reason for coming today.'

He pulled two envelopes from his pocket. 'Invitations to our post-Christmas bash.'

'Oh, how lovely,' said Aunt Julia, bustling in. 'I do enjoy your parties, Daniel.'

'One for you and Richard, and one for Jenny.'

I took the envelope as if it was solid gold.

Aunt Julia noticed me for the first time.

'I'm sorry, dear, I didn't see you there.'

I was sitting, large as life, on the couch. I saw a TV programme once, where a young girl was ignored by everyone around her and eventually faded away. I looked down to check if I was still visible and then opened the envelope and read the invitation.

'Now, Daniel, you know Jenny doesn't go to parties. Sometimes they're a little too much for her.'

'Well, it's very kind of you to imply our parties are that lively, Julia, but it's just drinks and nibbles at our house. No dancing girls, no gambling, and certainly nothing to frighten the horses.'

I opened my mouth to decline politely.

'*You should go,*' said Thomas quietly and something in his voice was different.

Francesca looked up from investigating her shopping. 'She doesn't do parties.'

'*You should go.*'

Now Aunt Julia pitched in. 'Thank you Daniel dear, but I'm afraid that Jenny ...'

'*You should go.*'

For a moment, everything was perfectly balanced and I had to decide which side to come down on.

'Yes,' I said, and everyone stared at me. 'Yes, I'd like to ... go. Thank you.'

'Lovely,' he said. 'We look forward to seeing the three of you. Tuesday week. Francesca, are you ready?'

She gathered up her bags.

He turned to Julia. 'My best to Richard. Jenny, I'd like to talk some more about Elizabeth. Can we grab a few minutes at the party?'

I nodded, feeling like a real person.

'What was that about?' grumbled Francesca as they went out the door.

My aunt turned to me. 'He's a very kind man. You know that, dear. It might be wise not to read too much into what is probably just social politeness.'

I nodded and tried not to let my pleasure spill away. I wanted to hang on to this moment. I was going to a party and someone wanted to talk to me there. Just like a real person.

It didn't happen. Although, to be fair, it wasn't Daniel's fault. It wasn't the

best party he'd ever thrown, although I enjoyed every minute.

I spent the next ten days worrying about the party. 'What will I do? Will people want me to talk? What will I say?'

'*You've got it all wrong,*' said Thomas, not very comfortingly. '*You should be obsessing about what to wear: how to do your hair and shoes.*'

'Shoes?'

'*Isn't that what women think about all the time? Shoes?*'

'I know what I'm going to wear,' I said. 'I've got shoes. And so have you – you're a horse. That's not what's bothering me. How shall I know what to do? I wish I hadn't said yes. I'm going to make such a fool of myself. No one will want to spend the evening listen to me regurgitate words. This is a disaster.'

'*No it isn't. Stop panicking. We'll walk it through. Now, you arrive, beautifully dressed and coiffured.*'

I snorted.

'*You don't want to do that. Firstly, it's not ladylike and secondly, you just said a really bad word in Horse.*'

'Really? What did I say?'

'*Never you mind. I don't want to hear language like that again from a young foal like you.*'

I giggled, suddenly feeling much better.

'*Right, you get out of the car. Slowly. Remember, do everything slowly. It gives you time to think and makes you look elegant. Let your aunt and uncle go in first. Walk in behind them. Pause and look around so you're not blindly walking into the room. Someone will take your coat. You don't have to say anything, just smile. Someone will offer you a drink.*' He looked at me. '*Nothing alcoholic.*'

I nodded. Absolutely nothing alcoholic.

'*Your host and hostess will greet you. Just smile and thank them for the invitation. Step aside for the next guests and look around. Do not find the nearest corner and stand there all night.*'

'But you'll be there, surely? You will come with me?'

'*Of course I will, I just don't want to spend the evening standing in a corner. Now, you look around the room. Smile and nod if anyone catches your eye. There's no need to say anything. I know you don't think so, but most people are kinder than you think.*'

I nodded again.

'*When you've got your bearings, start to move slowly round the room. He's got a great art collection and most of the rooms will probably be open so we'll wander round and have a look. I particularly want to see Checkland's portrait of Francesca, don't you?*'

'Yes,' I said, 'and the library will probably be open, too. We can look at the books.'

'*There you go. That should keep us out of mischief for a while. Then we'll get something to eat, have another non-alcoholic drink, and go home. Your*

aunt turns into a pumpkin at midnight.’

I laughed, suddenly feeling better about the whole thing. It was a good plan. Shame we never got to use it.

I came nervously down the stairs, wearing a plain black dress. I’d tied my mother’s lovely purple, blue, and green glass pendant on a purple ribbon around my neck. I’d left off my pony tail and wore my hair loose with a jewelled slide.

My aunt watched me. ‘Richard, I’m really not sure about this.’

Well, at least she hadn’t reeled back in horror at my outfit, but she could have said something.

‘I think you look lovely,’ said Thomas softly, behind me.

‘My dear, Jenny will enjoy an evening out. It’s not as if she’ll be making a habit of it.’

‘No, but she’ll get tired and ...’

I’m right here, I thought.

‘Just tune her out,’ said Thomas. *‘That’s what I do. I haven’t heard a word she’s said in the last ten years. Don’t let her upset you. Stay calm.’*

Not easy. My heart was thumping away and my palms were clammy and I hadn’t even left the house yet.

Somehow, Uncle Richard overcame her misgivings and we climbed into the car. I sat in the back and stared out of the window. Perhaps I could just stay in the car until it was time to go home.

‘Don’t make me come and get you,’ said Thomas, appearing briefly and then disappearing again. The Cheshire Horse.

The Palmers lived in a lovely old house on the other side of Rushford. It was built of soft red brick and had those wonderful twisted chimneys.

I ran over Thomas’s instructions. Uncle Richard helped Aunt Julia out of the car and then me. He gave my hand a little squeeze, which I appreciated. Perhaps I could enjoy this after all.

It all went just as Thomas had said. I smiled at the person who took my coat and stood behind my aunt and uncle as they talked to Francesca and Daniel. They moved away and I stepped forward. Daniel was kindness itself. ‘I’m so glad you came. Look, Francesca, Jenny’s here.’

But Francesca had already stepped aside to talk to more interesting people. My heart sank, but he glossed over it well. ‘Never mind, she’ll catch you later. Most of the house is open tonight, so please feel free to wander around and have a look at my little collection. And I know you’ll be interested in the library. Francesca’s portrait is in there.’

She called him to her.

‘Nip along and have a look if you get the chance, Jenny. And I still want to talk to you later. Enjoy yourself.’ He disappeared.

Someone approached with a tray of glasses. ‘Fruit punch, madam. Red is alcoholic and green is not.’

I took a green. So, I was in. I had a drink and I hadn’t yet had to say a word.

Excellent!

Remembering Thomas's instructions, I walked slowly around the hall. Soft lights were gently reflected in the wooden panelling and lovely and unusual objects were displayed on the walls. I itched to look more closely. Daniel and his parties were popular and the place was full. People had spilled into the nearby rooms. I could hear bright chatter everywhere. Soft music played. I looked around and did see one or two people who'd come to our house occasionally. One woman waggled her fingers which was nice. I smiled back.

I found a quiet spot – not a corner – and sipped my drink, looking, I hoped, enigmatic and thoughtful. And here came Thomas.

'Don't you like your drink?'

'Yes, it's lovely. Why?'

'You had a funny expression on your face.'

'I'm doing International Woman of Mystery.'

'No,' he said. *'Seriously, no.'*

'You're a horse,' I said. *'You can't even have an expression.'*

'Well, you're wrong there, clever clogs. Watch.' He pulled his lips back and wrinkled his nose, exposing huge horsey teeth.

'Please don't ever do that to small children or pregnant women.'

He snorted again. I liked it when he laughed. *'That's better,'* he said. *'You look a little more relaxed now. Shall we take a gander round the place?'*

We moved towards the stairs. I said, 'Upstairs first, then downstairs. Library last – the big finish.'

'Good plan,' he said and we had started up the handsome staircase when we saw headlights flash against the windows.

'Late arrival,' said Thomas and we paused to see who it was. The stairs were directly opposite the front door so we had the best view in the house.

The door opened and a single male figure walked into the room. All conversation stopped dead so I could clearly hear his footsteps on the tiled floor.

He stood, seemingly unaware of the consternation he was causing. He looked confidently round the room, seeking his host. Or more likely, his hostess. His tie was askew, his hair rumpled. He dug his hands in his pockets, relaxed and rude. I could hardly believe my eyes and stepped nearer to the banisters for a closer look. The movement must have caught his eye and he looked up. He stood staring up at me for far too long and I was unable to look away.

It was Russell Checkland and he was very, very drunk.

'Oh, wow!' said Thomas. *'This is going to be good.'*

Chapter Two

For a second nobody quite seemed to know what to do. Even Francesca seemed transfixed. She stood in a doorway, slightly behind him so he hadn't seen her yet. The moment dragged on endlessly until Daniel Palmer, wearing the politest smile in the history of the world, stepped forward.

'Russell, how good of you to come. We weren't sure if you would be here or not.'

I suspected this was Daniel-speak for: 'You weren't invited and you're certainly not welcome but let's not make a scene.'

'I was invited,' he said, very carefully, swaying gently. 'Got the invite here somewhere to prove it,' and looked vaguely around as if expecting to see it dangling in the air nearby. Someone, somewhere, gave a nervous giggle.

'*He's had a few,*' muttered Thomas. '*Why do you think he's here?*'

Because, I thought, he can't stay away. Like a moth to a flame. And she encourages him.

Francesca moved to his side, beautiful in black and white. 'Oh, here you are at last, Russell. Still, better late than never.' She took his arm. 'Daniel, dear, I thought it would be nice for Russell to meet a few people socially, now that he's trying to re-establish himself in Rushford, and this would be a good start.'

Daniel's pause was only infinitesimal. 'What a good idea, Francesca. Why don't you take him around and introduce him?' and stepped back to resume his conversation, apparently uninterested in the new arrival, leaving Francesca and Russell somewhat isolated in the centre of the room. A message had been sent.

'*Nicely done,*' observed Thomas. '*She really is a complete nitwit, isn't she? I wonder if she realises the damage she does. I doubt it. If she's got any sense she'll introduce him to Mr Splash of Cold Water, Mrs Strong Black Coffee, and Miss Taxi Home. Still, we don't want to miss any of this, do we? Shall we go downstairs? We can do upstairs later.*'

I agreed and we re-joined the now wildly gossiping throng downstairs. There was absolutely no sign of Aunt Julia or Uncle Richard, both of whom would have been magically absorbed into the woodwork at the first signs of social awkwardness.

We meandered from room to room, from picture to picture, admiring and criticising until we got to the library at the end. The lights were on, but the room was empty. Long and narrow, it ran along the back of the house. Every inch of wall space was shelved. Heavy crimson curtains hung at the windows. The furniture was all dark wood and soft leather. It was a very masculine room. The only sign of Francesca here was the famous portrait over the fireplace, but, typically, it dominated the room.

The portrait was magnificent. The intricacies of the costume were wonderfully rendered, the folds and creases in the full silk sleeves being particularly eye-catching. The lace collar at the neck was delicately beautiful, drawn in with a swift, sure hand. The face was pure Francesca. She looked directly out of the picture, a small enigmatic smile on her lips, plotting something unpleasant; or more likely, knowing Francesca, wondering what to have for lunch. An unseen light caught her hair, highlighting red-gold curls amongst the dark shadows. It was, as they say, a work of art.

‘Well,’ said Thomas, quietly. *‘I forgive him everything. This is remarkable. What’s she holding?’*

I stood on tip-toe. ‘A small glass phial.’

‘Do you think she’s on her way to poison someone or has she just done it?’

‘We’ll never know.’

‘Why did he stop painting?’

I shrugged. ‘His Muse left him.’

‘Do you think she regrets that now?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe she doesn’t know either.’

‘Well, he certainly does. Poor old Russell.’

I looked at him in surprise.

‘He got a raw deal. I wonder if she realises she’s probably ruined his life.’

I shivered. Suddenly, this wasn’t a mildly amusing soap opera, to be viewed from a safe distance and speculated over. This was three people’s lives. And yes, if Russell Checkland didn’t pull himself together, his life was probably ruined. And I suspected Daniel and Francesca weren’t that happy either. All at once, my quiet life in the attic didn’t seem so bad.

‘Imagine,’ said Thomas, softly. ‘Just imagine. You have your whole life ahead of you, glittering and full of promise with a woman who is your inspiration, whom you adore, who is everything to you. Then one day you wake up and she’s waltzed out of the door to be with someone else who can give her the new toys she wants. How must he have felt? You know he trashed his place, don’t you? Ripped up his canvases and threw the whole lot in a skip. And he had such talent, Jenny. There was so much joy in his paintings. And now it’s all gone. I wonder if he can ever get it back. I wonder if he even wants it back.’

He sounded so sad. I turned to him and reached up and gently touched his forehead. I don’t often stroke him. He’s not a pet.

‘You quite like him, don’t you?’

‘I do, yes. His father was an unsympathetic man. His mother, who might have been a buffer between the two of them, died when he was still young enough to need her. The love of his life left him. Even his talent deserted him. So yes, despite all his efforts to alienate the world, I do like him.’

I remembered that long look on the stairs. ‘I do too.’

We stared at the picture for a while. I finished my drink and looked for somewhere to put the glass. A hand came out of nowhere and a voice said,

‘Shall I take that?’

I’m really quite hopeless in social situations. I didn’t know what to do. Give him the glass? Recoil in horror? Ignore him? Give him a smile? Struggle through a long hello? And where was Thomas when I needed him? Oh yes, down the other end of the room, helpfully peering at first editions.

I turned and looked at Russell Checkland properly for the first time. His hair was damp. I suspected he had been under the cold tap after all. He hadn’t changed that much since I last saw him, but there were new lines at his eyes and mouth. His face was thinner and if Thomas was right, and there had been joy, then there wasn’t any now.

The silence had gone on for far too long.

‘It’s all right,’ he said defiantly. ‘I’ve been told I can stay if I behave myself and who better to behave myself with than you? Although actually, as I say that, I realise it wasn’t the most flattering remark to make. Feel free to box my ears.’

Oh, good. I was a safe option. Just what every woman wants to hear. For a brief moment I wished I was dark and dangerous, and did not allow my eyes to flick to the portrait.

I knew how to get rid of him. I took two deep breaths, focused on the ragged knot of his tie and began the struggle.

It had completely the wrong effect. He didn’t wait politely, or try to help, or sigh and edge away. He said, ‘Good God, Jenny, that’s got worse since I last saw you. Wait here a minute,’ and disappeared, leaving me still clutching my glass and struggling to catch up. I had forgotten his nervous energy and how quickly he could move.

He was back in seconds, clutching a cup and saucer and a glass of the red punch. ‘Here you go. Get this down you.’

I reached for the cup and saucer, but he said, ‘No, that’s for me. This is yours,’ and thrust the glass at me. I took a cautious sip. It seemed OK. A little tangy, but otherwise quite innocuous.

He started talking again while I sipped. I had also forgotten he could chat for England. ‘So, what have you been up to while I’ve been away? The last time I saw you, you were clutching a sheath of exam results and grinning fit to bust. Did you go to college? University? What are you doing now? Are you still in Rushford?’

I stared at him hopelessly. He grinned down at me and that stupid fringe fell over his eyebrow and suddenly, I was determined to do this. I would do this. I would.

Nothing happened.

I tried again.

Nothing happened.

He was waiting expectantly and then I saw the penny drop. He reached out and gently touched my forearm with two fingers. ‘I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. And I’m drunk. And I’m angry. And none of it’s your fault. Would you like me to

go away?’

As far as I could see, Thomas had completely disappeared. So no help there. I shook my head and gestured to an old leather sofa set back from the fire.

‘Good idea,’ he said. ‘My legs feel as if they belong to someone else at the moment. I wish my tongue did. I didn’t mean to frighten you. You look so pretty tonight that I just forgot.’

Did I also mention he was a silver-tongued charmer?

He sat down very carefully. I sat alongside feeling a little more confident and warmly glowing.

‘Right, let’s start again. It’s good to see you. Are you well?’

I nodded and raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Yes, I’m fine too. Not at the moment, obviously, and tomorrow I’m going to hate myself and probably the rest of the world too, but I’ll worry about that tomorrow. What are you doing now? Do you have a job?’

I shook my head.

‘So what do you do? Of course, you probably don’t have to work, do you? You’ve got your parents’ money. Where do you live? Wait, are you still living with the Kingdoms?’

I nodded.

‘Hang on. I’m twenty-nine, you must be, what, about twenty-eight, and you still live with those dull old sticks? Why? What happened? Oh, sod this for a game of soldiers, Jenny. Drink your drink and say something.’

What could I say? I couldn’t tell him it was either Aunt Julia or some sort of institution. He put a finger gently under my glass. ‘Drink up. It might help. If not, you can write me an essay. Five hundred words on “Why I choose to live with the most boring people in the universe when I could be out being a good-time girl”.’

I choked, sipped, and choked again.

‘That’s my girl. You’ll be chattering away in no time. When I’ve had a few I can’t shut up.’

It doesn’t work like that, but it occurred to me that I could be sober and awkward, or drunk and awkward, and I’d been sober and awkward all my life. I took a few more sips and leaned back.

‘That’s better. Now, tell me. There’s no rush. The longer I’m out of the way the happier people seem to be.’

‘I know the feeling.’

Now where had that come from? Oh, yes. I peered into my half-empty glass. Perhaps he hadn’t heard me.

He was staring into the fire. Without him looking at me, my heart slowed down a little. I began to feel more relaxed. Things unclenched. I thought of what I wanted to say and reduced it to the fewest possible words.

‘They thought it ... best I stayed there. Sometimes, things get ... so I ... it was easier. Better. I read. I study. I did get my ... degree, you see,’ I said,

desperately trying to make myself more interesting to someone who did more in a day than I did in a year.

He wasn't deceived at all. 'But you could have done so much. You still could. You could still live in Rushford where your family and friends are. I'm not saying go to London or Leeds or Bristol, but surely ...' he petered out. 'Sorry, it's not my business, I know. It just seems such a waste of a life.'

Something writhed inside me and for a moment I was back in those long dark days when my world was so small I couldn't even stand up in it. And those long dark nights when I wondered why I was so insignificant and what would become of me and trying to stifle the panic ...

Something must have shown in my face because here came Thomas, galloping down the room to stand nearby, solid and comforting and protecting. My shield against the world. He breathed warmth and reassurance into my hair.

Russell was already putting down his cup and saucer, not looking at me. 'It occurs to me that I'm doing rather a lot of damage tonight and not just to myself. Huge apologies, Jenny. Sometimes I think I shouldn't be allowed to mix with decent people.'

From nowhere, I said again, 'I know the feeling.'

He sat back down again. 'Yes, you do, don't you. And you're dealing with it much better than I am.'

'No. No, I'm not. At least you're ... fighting back. You get out there and make the world notice you. You have the freedom to ... come and go as you please. You have social skills. You have talent. You ... could be whatever you wanted. Every day, I just sit in my room, hating it and unable to leave because I'm too ... scared to take the consequences.'

Oh my God. Did I just say that? Did I really say all that?

He pounced. 'What consequences?'

Oh, what the hell. I tipped the glass back and finished my drink, relishing that rather nice, warm feeling. 'I either live with my family or I have to go to some sort of ... home. That's the deal.'

He was bewildered. 'But why? What's the matter with you?'

I glared at him, exasperated.

'No, I don't mean that. The last I heard, having a bit of a stutter wasn't any sort of reason for chucking a person into a secure facility.'

'Well, I don't think they meant ... Broadmoor.'

'They shouldn't mean anything at all. It's all bollocks, Jenny. I'm sure they mean well, but there is such a thing as over-protectiveness and it wouldn't do you any harm to get out a bit more. You're talking to me. I can understand you easily enough. You should go out and practise more. Talk to people in shops. Ask people the time. I mean it. You get anxious because you can't speak properly and you can't speak properly because you get anxious. Break the circle.'

'It's not that easy. If it doesn't clear up in childhood then the chances

are ...'

'I don't care what the chances are. Make your own chances. You're talking to me at the moment.'

'That's the alcohol.'

'In a fruit punch? I don't think so. Give yourself more credit, girl. Or alternatively, start the day with a couple of vodkas. Works for me.'

I tried to see Thomas's face, but he was turned away from me. Was he laughing?

'Oh yes,' I said sarcastically. 'Instead of waking ... each morning wondering how to fill the hours ahead, I can ... pull a bottle from under the pillow and ...' I stopped. And what? What would I do if I could? If I had a choice, what would I choose? Frightening chasms yawned at my feet. This was why I stayed in my room.

'Well, I don't mean you should hitch-hike across India, for God's sake. Start small. Here's an idea. What do you know about buckets?'

OK, no more alcohol for me. I obviously had zero tolerance and it was already affecting my brain. However, I knew the answer to this one.

'Plastic things,' I said proudly. 'In many colours. Or metal. Shiny. They have holes. There's a ... song about it. You kick them when you die.' And sat back, pleased with the completeness of my answer.

'Excellent, you're obviously a leading authority. What are you doing tomorrow morning?'

'Nothing,' I said, without hesitation.

'Good. Meet me outside the post office at 10.30. No, better make it 11.00 – I'll need a bit of a lie-in. You can help me buy buckets.'

'Look out,' said Thomas, suddenly. '*Incoming.*'

I looked up. A very unhappy looking Uncle Richard was approaching.

'Yes,' I said to Russell, and then my uncle was upon us, his gentle face frowning.

'Russell. I heard you were here.'

Russell stood up, suddenly alarmingly sober. 'Richard, good evening. Jenny and I have been catching up.'

My uncle looked at me, then at the glass on the table and said in apocalyptic tones, 'Jenny? Have you been ... drinking?'

I didn't know whether to laugh, cry, hiccup, or panic. As usual, everything inside me clumped together for safety and nothing emerged.

'Good heavens,' said Russell, indignantly, 'of course she hasn't. Unless you count coffee, of course.' He gestured to the cup and saucer.

'Jenny, you know your aunt doesn't like you to drink coffee. It can be very stimulating.'

'Have a heart, Richard, it's a party. Let her have a little fun.'

I knew he was laughing at my uncle. I wondered if he was laughing at me, too.

'Of course, I'm sure just one ...'

‘Will not set her on the road to eternal damnation,’ finished Russell.

I stood up and he steadied me while pretending to shake hands. ‘Nice to have met you again, Jenny.’

I nodded, thankful for once that no one would be expecting me to say anything, but very aware of Uncle Richard radiating gentle disapproval. I smiled at Russell who winked at me and mouthed, ‘Buckets! Don’t forget.’ At least, that’s what I think it was.

‘Come along, Jenny. It’s half past ten and your aunt is feeling tired.’

‘Better make that six hundred words,’ Russell called after me as I meekly followed my uncle out of the room. Thomas walked alongside, rather closer than usual, occasionally (and quite unnecessarily) having a quiet snort.

So that was my first party.

Shortly afterwards, I got my first proposal of marriage.

I woke really early the next morning, full of excitement. I had an appointment. I was meeting someone. I had a purpose.

‘It’s only half past six,’ said Thomas from the corner. *‘It’s not light yet and you didn’t get to bed until nearly eleven last night. You’ll wear yourself out.’*

‘Yes, very funny.’

‘Make yourself a cup of tea and get back into bed.’

So I did.

Halfway down the mug I began to have doubts.

‘Do you think he’ll forget?’

‘No.’

‘He was pretty drunk.’

‘Not when he was talking to you.’

‘Do you think he’ll change his mind?’

‘No, a man always needs buckets.’

‘Suppose he can’t come?’

‘Then he won’t be there at 11.00 and you’ll be disappointed because, along with 99% of the human race at one time or another in their lives, you’ll have been stood up. Just like a real person.’

‘Do you still like him?’

‘Yes.’

I drank some more tea, watching him through my eyelashes.

He sighed. *‘Yes, I think he likes you too. Good grief, it’s like living with a teenager again.’*

I was ready to leave the house by half past nine. Thomas held out until ten, finally giving in, saying we could walk really slowly and window-shop on the way. So we walked really slowly and window-shopped on the way. It was raining, and I kept hitting people with my umbrella.

Eventually, he agreed it probably was best just to go and wait at the post office. *‘Before you blind someone.’*

We waited an anxious fifteen minutes. ‘He’s not coming,’ I said.

‘It’s only just coming up to eleven. He’s a single man with a hangover

looking for a parking space. We'll be lucky to see him at all before noon. Just relax.'

So we stood on the steps and watched people skitter by in the rain. At only a few minutes past eleven, someone tooted. Russell Checkland solved his parking problems by simply stopping wherever he wanted to be and waiting for people to go to him.

I threaded my way through parked cars and he leaned over and opened the door for me.

'*Umbrella,*' reminded Thomas, guessing correctly that sensible thinking had taken the morning off. I wrestled away while a cacophony of horns built up and the massed rank of Mrs Pargeter, our Traffic Warden, bore down upon us.

Flustered and wet, I fell into his old Land Rover. It smelled very odd and one of those pine-scented fir trees hanging lop-sided from the mirror had long since given up.

'Good morning,' he said, pulling out into traffic to a fresh barrage of tooting. 'Nasty day. Did you get into much trouble last night?'

I shook my head. I'd slipped away as soon as we got home and I think both Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard were so relieved not to have to dust off their parenting skills that they let me go.

'*Ask him how he is,*' said Thomas. '*Remember your manners.*'

'How are you?'

'Absolutely fine. Slept like a log. Feel great. Jennies to pick up. Buckets to buy.'

'Why?'

Thank God he understood verbal shorthand and that he could chat enough for both of us.

'For the roof. It leaks on the north side. My father did most of the roof a couple of years ago and he left that side because it wasn't too bad but now it is. So, buckets.'

'Can it be fixed?'

'Easily, if you happen to have thousands of pounds. I don't, so a quick trip to the hardware store and a cost of about thirty quid instead. Clever, eh?'

I nodded and we splashed into the car park. I'd never been to one of these places before. I'm pretty certain Uncle Richard hadn't either and I'm damn sure Aunt Julia never had. I tried to imagine Francesca in something white and gauzy wafting up and down the aisles buying grout and emulsion and failed. Really failed.

'This way,' said Russell, striding off and I followed on behind.

Thomas was full of it. '*Wow! Look at this. What's that? Good grief, why have we never been here before? This place is magic. What's that for?*'

We found the buckets. Plastic and multi-coloured.

'What colour?' I asked.

'All of them,' he said, chucking eight into his trolley. 'Let's nip over to

“Gardening” and see if they’ve got any metal ones. They can double up for ashes and Boxer.’

The morning began to take on a slightly surreal feeling.

We got two galvanised buckets and queued up at the cash point. Russell pulled out his wallet and frowned.

‘Problem?’

‘I’m trying to remember which card is least likely to be rejected. Let’s try – the blue one.’

Credit card rejection was a whole new world to me and I waited breathlessly for this new experience. But not today. With an astonishing amount of electronic beeping, we were through.

Russell set off for the exit at only just sub-light speed. Thomas lingered. ‘Well,’ he said, looking around one last time. ‘*Who’d have thought it?*’

‘Come on,’ I said, nervous about being left behind. I could easily imagine Russell driving off without us, lost in the excitement of freshly acquired buckets. There was a toot from the car park.

I expected to be driven home, or at least dropped off outside the post office, my day over with, but he turned the other way.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, did you have other plans? It’s just it’s raining so hard I want to get back to catch the drips. But I can easily drop you wherever you want to be.’

I certainly didn’t want to go home yet. ‘No, that’s fine.’

He speeded up again and we racketed down the lanes, through Whittington, and out the other side. He turned off just past the duck pond, up a narrow lane, and there was Frogmorton Farm, exactly as I remembered it from all those years ago.

A long, low rambling building of red brick here, and a bit of stone there, with many chimneys. Oddly shaped windows had apparently been flung at random across the exterior. Various outbuildings of strange construction and purpose huddled around a yard, which in turn opened into a large field.

The gate was open and we pulled straight into the yard.

‘You don’t want to go in through the front door, do you?’

I shook my head.

‘Good, because I can’t get it open. This way.’

We divided up the buckets between us and I followed him into the house.

I remembered the mud room and its distinctive smell of old wet coats and rubber wellies. I was hurried through and straight into the kitchen.

‘What ho, Mrs C! Buckets!’

It was Mrs Crisp. She was still here. She was a little plumper and a little greyer and her eyes were a little more unfocused, but here was another one who didn’t look a lot different.

I remembered how she used to bring us biscuits and juice and how I thought she smelled funny until Aunt Julia came back from a ‘ladies lunch’

one day, and I realised it was sherry. She turned away from stirring something on the stove, wiped her red hands on a tea-towel, and came forward.

‘Miss Dove, it’s very nice to see you again.’ She took my buckets off me, much to my relief.

I smiled and nodded.

‘No time to chat,’ cried Russell, making for the other door. ‘Come on, Jenny.’

She rolled her eyes. I took back the buckets and followed him out.

‘Something smells nice,’ I said to Thomas. ‘Do you think they’ll ask us to lunch?’

He gave me a funny look. ‘*I’m certain of it.*’

Up in the attics I carefully placed my buckets over the damp patches. There were depressing but oddly musical drips. Russell sighed. I looked up. Here and there, I could see tiny chinks of daylight.

‘It’s not so bad,’ he said defensively. ‘The tiles can stay on. The undersides need filling and a waterproof membrane putting across the joists and it’ll all be fine again. But not until the summer.’

‘Because of the weather?’ I asked, glad to show off a bit of knowledge.

‘No, that’s when the rent’s due again.’

I must have looked surprised.

‘I rent most of my land to my neighbour up the lane. For his sheep. He brings them down off the moors in winter and for lambing. For which I expect they’re extremely grateful. I know I am. Anyway, this year’s rent will see to this,’ he gestured to the roof. ‘At the moment I’ve got other things on.’

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Decorating. I’ve got the central heating in; that was last year’s rent. Quite a bit more than last year’s rent, actually. But that’s done, so at least we’re warm now. When I get the roof done that’s pretty well the last of the structural work. Now I’m going to slap on two coats of magnolia all over, polish up the floors, and that’s it until a chimney blows down, or I discover dry rot or something equally shitty. Would you like the tour?’

I nodded with enthusiasm.

‘Come on then.’ He seized my wrist and I was whirled away.

We started downstairs.

The kitchen was a good-sized room with terracotta tiles. Dressers filled with china lined the walls. A huge table with mismatched chairs occupied the middle of the room. Unlike Aunt Julia’s carefully co-ordinated designer desert, everything here was warm, comfortable, shabby, and smelled delicious. There was a huge, old iron-type range that also provided hot water.

‘Big walk-in pantry over there. Through that door is Mrs C’s domain. No one ever goes in there. She has all her past lovers chained to the walls. Sometimes at night, when it’s all quiet, you can hear their piteous moaning. It’s so sad.’

She slapped a tea-towel at him. ‘Go away. Lunch in thirty minutes.’ To me.

‘You do like lamb and apricot casserole?’

‘Am I staying to lunch?’

‘*Told you,*’ said Thomas.

‘Sorry, Jenny, I forgot to tell you.’

‘No,’ Mrs Crisp said. ‘You forgot to *ask* her.’

‘Yes, that too. Jenny, would you like to stay to lunch?’

‘*Don’t even think about saying no,*’ muttered Thomas.

We looked into the dining room, a big, sad room with the shutters closed. Russell pulled one back so we could see better, but it wasn’t worth the effort. He pushed it back again.

Across the corridor was a little morning room. This was much nicer, looking out over the very neglected garden, but much smaller and cosier. ‘Do you eat in here?’

‘No, I usually eat in the kitchen. For a time I slept there too. I like to get value from a room.’

In the old days, the next room would have been a parlour, but someone had knocked down a wall or two and it was now a very large room with two sets of old-fashioned French windows opening into the garden. A big wooden staircase at one end led up into the gloom. The wide fireplace was cold and empty. The furniture was drab and sad.. But it could be lovely. The floor had real wooden floorboards, and there was plenty of room on the walls for books and artwork. I could see this being a very nice room.

It never struck me that Russell Checkland was being uncharacteristically quiet, watching me take it all in.

There was another set of double doors near the stairs. I pointed.

‘They lead to a small vestibule and the un-openable front door. Very useful for discouraging unwanted visitors. And up the stairs again we go.’

The stairs were beautifully made and steady as a rock but they needed carpet. They were noisy and slippery.

‘I know,’ he said, although I hadn’t said anything. ‘One day. In the meantime, just take care. I bet Julia doesn’t know you’re here, so if you fall I shall just dump your lifeless body at the side of the road and pretend I never knew you.’

It seemed funny at the time.

At the top of the stairs there was a dog-leg. Down the shorter leg were two large bedrooms.

‘That’s mine,’ he said, pointing down the corridor to the door at the end. There were three narrow steps leading up to it. I remembered last night and wondered if that was why he sometimes slept in the kitchen. Too drunk to cope with those little steps. He didn’t offer to show the room to me. I suspected the bed was unmade and he’d hung his socks and dirty underwear on the floor. Or maybe, of course, he had Francesca in there, stretched on out the bed, naked and demanding.

‘*Pull yourself together,*’ said Thomas, and I did try.

I did get to see the other room and it was lovely. Care had been taken here. There were two tall windows with a large bed in between. Two built-in wardrobes flanked the fireplace which had one of those gas fires that looks like the real thing. A tall chest of drawers stood against one wall and a small dressing table against another. It smelled freshly cleaned. With paint and fabric it could be a very pretty room.

Had he prepared it for Francesca?

‘And this is the best bit. Come and look.’

He plunged forward like an estate agent on a combination of speed and commission. We went through a small door in the corner and down a little twisting stair of six steps. They opened out into a small but modern bathroom. Shower cubicle, bath, washbasin, toilet, it was all there.

‘Isn’t this great? We think it was a maid’s room, once upon a time. Or maybe a nursery. What do you think?’

I looked around and smiled.

‘There’s more.’

Back up the stairs, through the bedroom, down the corridor, turn left at the top of the stairs. ‘Three smaller bedrooms and a family bathroom.’

I pointed to the door at the end.

‘Oh, my studio. People don’t really go in there. Are you hungry?’

I nodded and we clattered back down the stairs. He kept a tight grip on my wrist until we got to the bottom.

Back in the kitchen, the table was laid. Mrs Crisp was on her way out with a cup of tea. ‘I’ll leave you in peace,’ she said, closing the door behind her.

I looked at Russell. ‘She usually spends the afternoons in her room. You know – lovers.’

I nodded wisely.

He said no more, which was unusual for him.

Lunch was delicious with a slice of home-made cheesecake to follow. I sat back, feeling at peace and not a little sleepy.

‘That’ll teach you to wake at the crack of dawn because you’ve got a date,’ said Thomas, unsympathetically.

‘This is not a date.’

‘Oh, isn’t it? Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to look out of the window now.’

And he did. Apart from the rain there was nothing to see, so God knows what he was playing at.

Russell loaded the dishwasher while I made coffee.

‘We can sit in the other room if you like, but I think it’s warmer and more comfortable here.’

I nodded.

‘So, what do you think?’

‘Not changed much. Bit more ... dilapidated. Lots of work.’

‘Mmm,’ he said. ‘Mrs C said I wasn’t to ask you this. In fact, she’s been

banging on about it since I first mentioned it to her, but I wondered – would you like to lend a hand?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, it’s not difficult. I thought if I do the sanding and preparation, you can come along afterwards with paint and roller and presto – there’s another room completed. Can you imagine how much better that bedroom would look with a bit of paint on the walls? We’ll put the radio on and have a good old sing-song at the same time. What do you think?’

‘I’ve never actually ... painted anything before.’

‘Well, it’s not difficult. It can’t be. Men do it. Say yes.’

I remembered how I had felt only that morning, waking up with something to look forward to. It needn’t be just for today. I could have that anticipation again.

I nodded vigorously, smiling.

‘You will? That’s great. We’ll get it done in half the time now. You don’t have to worry. You’ll just be doing the gentle stuff. I’ll do all the hard work.’

‘Believe that and you’ll believe anything.’

‘OK. I’ll pick you up at the usual place tomorrow.’

We had a usual place!

‘Shall we say ten o’clock? We’ll give you lunch and I’ll take you back around half three, four-ish. Leave your painty clothes here.’

I nodded again, heart singing with excitement.

I said to Thomas, ‘What shall I tell Aunt Julia?’

‘Why would she ask? Has she ever asked how you spend your days?’

True.

‘Fancy another coffee to celebrate your entry to the ranks of the unpaid and overworked?’

He was just topping up my mug – two coffees in less than an hour. I was going to hell but feeling extremely cheerful about it – when I heard another car pulling into the yard. For one really nasty moment I thought Aunt Julia had miraculously divined my whereabouts and despatched Uncle Richard to bring me home.

Two complete strangers wandered in. I automatically drew back.

‘Hey,’ said the man. ‘That horse of yours needs more exercise.’

Ah, that would be Boxer. The shiny buckets were for him.

‘I know, but he doesn’t like the rain.’

‘I don’t know what on earth possessed you to buy that big girl’s blouse in the first place.’

‘Well, I lost rather a lot of money on him a few years ago. It creates a bond.’

‘Hello,’ said the man, spotting me despite my best efforts. ‘I won’t wait for Russell to introduce us. He has the social skills of a bicycle. I’m Andrew Checkland. God help me, I’m some sort of cousin, although I try to keep that pretty quiet so please don’t tell anyone, and this is ...’ He looked round.

‘Where did she go? I know she was behind me a minute ago. Hoi!’

‘Do not “hoi” at me,’ said his companion, hopping through the door trying to get a muddy shoe off. She was tall with blonde hair pulled back in a severe bun which showed off her cheekbones. She had a slight accent. I discovered later she was German. ‘I need help with this shoe.’

‘You have five hundred pairs of shoes. How can you have forgotten how to take them off?’

Russell pulled up a chair before she toppled over. ‘Here you go, Tanya. Sit down while you struggle with the nasty English shoes. Please allow me to introduce my lunch date, Miss Jenny Dove. Jenny, this is some sort of semi-cousin I keep around out of pity, and the impossibly beautiful Miss Tanya Bauer who steadfastly refuses to leave him for me.’

They were a very good-looking couple. Russell was, I thought, handsome in his own way, but he couldn’t match Andrew’s conventional dark good looks. There was a slight resemblance between them, but Russell’s face was longer and bonier. And Tanya was breath-taking.

She smiled kindly. ‘I cannot shake hands because my hands are dirty as they always are when I come to Russell’s house, and this hound does not help, but I am very pleased to meet you.’

I smiled back.

‘Nice to meet you, too,’ said Andrew, sliding into the seat opposite. ‘Have we met before?’

‘For God’s sake, Andrew,’ said Russell. ‘Give the girl a chance.’ He turned to me. ‘He’s a Checkland. He can’t help himself. Don’t be fooled by his superficial glamour. Concentrate on me.’

Across the kitchen, Tanya gave up with her shoe. ‘It is immoveable and I have broken a nail,’ she announced. ‘Andrew, please bring me coffee.’

He sighed heavily, and found two mugs. ‘Is this fresh?’

‘Nearly.’

He poured two mugs and handed her one. ‘There you are, my legal lovely. Coffee to take away the pain.’

‘So,’ said Russell. ‘Don’t think it’s not lovely to see you but why are you here? Are you stopping long?’

‘Five minutes to check on Boxer, the house, and you. In that order of importance. And, of course, to meet this beautiful lady. Hello again, Jenny.’

I smiled at him again. He was lovely. He twinkled back at me.

‘Stop that,’ said Russell.

‘Look at you,’ said Thomas. ‘*This time yesterday not a man in sight and now you’ve got two. Just imagine what you’ll have achieved by the weekend.*’

‘You’ve seen the horse. The house has new buckets and I’m fine. You can go now.’

Andrew drained his mug. ‘Alas. I have other patients. Patients who pay, no less. Your horse is fine, Russ. Just finish the course of tablets and he’ll be as good as new.’

It struck me, watching the two of them, that he eyed Russell rather more closely than was warranted. I realised he'd heard about last night. He'd come to check on his cousin. I'd liked him as soon as I'd met him and now I liked him even more.

He looked over at Tanya. 'Are you ready?' Another one who couldn't sit still for long.

'No,' she said, placidly. 'I want to finish my coffee and talk to Russell and Jenny.'

He sat back down immediately. She sank her nose in her mug but not before she caught my eye for a very quick moment. So that's how you manage a Checkland. Although I never knew there were two of them. I wasn't sure the world was ready for this.

'We're going to start with the painting tomorrow,' announced Russell.

Andrew cocked an eyebrow. 'We?'

'Jenny's agreed to lend a hand.'

Andrew groaned. 'You can't rope this perfectly lovely young woman into acting as your unpaid drudge, Russell. The days of white slavery are done. Jenny, heed my words. Flee. Flee while you can. It's not as if he's going to pay you. He never pays me.'

'You never send me a bill.'

'He never pays me, either,' said Mrs Crisp, coming back into the kitchen.

'I do,' said Russell indignantly. 'I distinctly remember paying you last ...' he paused.

'Last Wednesday?' said Andrew, helpfully, and she snorted.

'Oh! That was a really bad word. Don't listen, Jenny.'

'Last month? Last year? Good grief, Russ.'

'I'm paid until the end of last month, thank you very much,' she said.

'There,' said Russell. 'I don't know what all the fuss is about and frankly, given I'm such a wonderful employer, you should pay me.'

Everyone snorted at that one and Thomas rolled his eyes at the language.

Tanya, meanwhile, had finished her coffee. 'I am ready to depart,' she said, hopping to the door. 'Oh, I remember now. Russell, you will come to lunch on Sunday. At one o'clock.'

Andrew shrugged. 'I never know whether it's a wobbly grasp of the English language or she's channelling her dominatrix side. Russell, we hope very much you will be able to join us for lunch on Sunday, around one-ish.'

'That is what I just said.'

'Indeed you did, my Teutonic temptress. I just rephrased in slightly more acceptable terms. Now there's a chance he'll actually come.'

'Are you doing roast pork?' said Russell, hopefully.

'If you wish it.'

'I do indeed, and you may phrase your invitation any way you please. If you could arrange for Andrew to be absent then the day will be perfect.'

'No, he must be there to talk to you about your life and make sure you do

not drink too much.'

Andrew groaned. I giggled.

'Yes,' said Russell. 'Good luck with that, mate. The door's behind you.'

Even Thomas didn't argue when I bounced out of bed the next morning. I packed up a pair of old jeans, some battered trainers, a faded sweatshirt, a few toiletries, and a towel.

I made sure to have a piece of toast with Mrs Finch in the kitchen just so no one would think I'd vanished off the face of the earth or been snatched by aliens, and Thomas and I oozed out into the drizzle at half past nine.

Astonishingly, he was outside the post office waiting for us. I thought he looked relieved.

'I wasn't sure you'd come,' he said, chucking my bag in the back and climbing in beside me. 'I did wonder if you'd had second thoughts.'

'No. Looking forward to it.'

He laughed. 'I'll soon put a stop to that.'

He pulled out to the usual fanfare of outraged beeping. I don't think he ever actually heard it.

Mrs Crisp was in the kitchen. 'Lunch is at one,' she said, severely.

'Steady on,' said Russell. 'I've only just had breakfast.'

'I'm talking to Jenny. Never mind him. You come down at one o'clock and take an hour for your lunch. Don't let him gallop you through it in ten minutes and then have you back up those stairs again.'

'You make it sound slightly indecent,' said Russell to her retreating back. 'We're only painting, you know.' A door closed behind her. 'I don't know,' he muttered. 'You pay them and they think they own you.'

'Where shall I change?' I asked, trying to get him back on track.

'You'd better stay out of my room or we'll have Mrs C muttering and crossing herself all morning, so use the nice one next door. Can you remember where it is? I'll get the stuff ready and meet you at the top of the stairs. I thought we'd do the three small bedrooms first, then the nice bedroom, then the landing. I'll do the stairs and we'll finish with the important rooms downstairs. OK?'

I nodded and shot off to change.

'Do you know what you're doing?'

'Not a clue.'

'I'll stand well back then.'

Actually, it was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Or I was a natural painter and decorator. Russell did the ceilings and I did the walls, which were quick and easy. I got rather a lot on me, especially the first day, and had to shower quite a bit out of my hair, but otherwise it went well.

We fell out over our choices in music so we listened to Radio 4 instead, mostly so that Russell could shout insults and argue vainly with whichever presenter happened to incur his wrath. Which was all of them. I found it more entertaining than the actual programmes.

Every day I emerged from the alley behind the post office, and resumed my normal life.

'A bit like Superman,' said Thomas, as I made my way home, pleasantly tired and with an unfamiliar but enjoyable sense of accomplishment. As far as I could see, no one had the slightest interest in my doings.

Time passed happily and then Thomas burst the bubble.

'You do realise that when you finish the dining room, probably the day after tomorrow, that's it? All finished.'

I hadn't realised. I'd been enjoying myself so much that I hadn't thought ahead at all. This time next week, I'd be back to my old ways. It was going to be hard. I'd had a glimpse of something better.

I swallowed and nodded.

'What will you do?'

I shook my head.

'Jenny ... speak.'

'I don't know. I've got used to being out of the house. Maybe I'll do some walking. Explore the moors.'

'Not on your own.'

'Maybe I'll join a walking group.'

'You?'

I thought that was a little unkind. Normally it was Thomas urging me on to try new things. I thought he would be pleased.

'Or maybe a book group.'

Silence.

'Or maybe the Local History Society.'

More silence. What was wrong with him?

'You think that's the answer?'

'What's the question?'

'What are you going to do about your feelings for Russell Checkland?'

'Nothing. You must have noticed, since I'm sure it was you who pointed it out to me in the first place, that he's head over heels in love with Francesca Kingdom.'

'No, he's not.'

'Are we talking about the same people here?'

'He doesn't love her. He desires her. He's obsessed with her. But he doesn't love her. Nor she him.'

'Well, he thinks he does, which is the same thing.'

'Not quite, but stop changing the subject.'

'I'm not. There just isn't anything to say.'

'Are you going to give up?'

'What?'

'You've had a taste of something good. You loved it. Look at the difference in you. You're positively sparkling. I'm surprised no one has said anything. Are you going to just give it all up?'

‘What are you suggesting? That I repaint the house a second time?’

‘No,’ he said in such patient tones that I could feel myself losing my temper. ‘*I’m just saying you should make an effort before it’s too late. Do you really want these last two weeks to be the sole highlight of your life?*’

I was so angry and hurt that I stamped off to bed there and then. I lay awake all night. Thomas stood by the window. I could hear his tail swishing. Neither of us spoke to the other.

Nor were we speaking when Russell collected me the next morning. I was quiet. Thomas was quiet. Even Russell was quiet.

We started the last room in a far from sunny atmosphere. I was annoyed with Thomas, who seemed to have gone out of his way to spoil my last few days here. It was so unlike him, I was upset and angry and ready to do anything to annoy the world.

So you could say he made a really good job of setting me up for my first proposal of marriage.

Chapter Three

Painting the dining-room seemed to take for ever. Russell worked so slowly that several times I had to wait for him before I could do my bit.

At about twelve thirty he suddenly said, 'I'm hungry. Shall we have an early lunch?'

I nodded, wrapped my roller in cling film, washed my hands, and followed him into the kitchen.

I can't remember what we had for lunch that day. That was a first. Mrs Crisp was a first-rate cook and we'd followed her instructions and lingered over lunch every day. I do know that at some point during the meal Thomas moved up beside me and whispered, '*Pay attention. I think this next bit is going to be important.*' He went to stand by the window again, looking out at the rain.

Russell, who had been nearly as silent as me, made coffee and passed me my usual mug. This was probably the last time this would ever happen. There was so little to do that he could easily finish it himself tomorrow. He was working himself up to tell me he didn't need me any more. I tried to be philosophical about it. Even just two weeks was better than none at all.

'No, it's not.'

He stirred his coffee, put down the spoon, picked it up, stirred his coffee again, and said, without looking at me, 'I've been thinking.'

He stared at his coffee for so long that I stared at it too, wondering if there was something wrong with it. He seemed nervous? What was going on?

'I've been thinking,' he said again, presumably in case I hadn't grasped it the first time round. 'I've had a bit of an idea and I don't want you to say anything until I've finished.'

As if that wouldn't happen anyway.

'It occurs to me, Jenny, that you and I may be able to help each other out a little.'

Having got so far, he lapsed back into silence, staring at his still swirling coffee. Confused, I glanced over to Thomas, who was apparently still engrossed in the darkening landscape outside but had his ears turned back so he wouldn't miss anything.

And then I got it. Of course, he wanted to borrow money. That was what the tour had been about, getting me involved in the painting, buying the buckets, the lunches, all leading up to a request for a loan. I don't know why he was so embarrassed. I was quite happy to help. Of course, Uncle Richard wouldn't be. He wouldn't be happy at all. He was a solicitor. He didn't like Russell Checkland. It wouldn't be easy, but at the end of the day, the money was mine and there were no strings attached.

And maybe, said an inner voice, you'll get to come here again. He's certain

to want to show you how the money's being spent. This means you can come back.

He obviously came to a decision, pushed his coffee away and said, all in a rush, 'The thing is, Jenny, I need money and you've got some. And you need a home and I've got one. I think we should get together for – mutual benefit.'

I stared at him, completely confused.

'Good grief.'

'Are you suggesting ...? No, I ... What?'

He stared at me in exasperation. 'What?'

'That's what I said.'

'Are you deliberately trying to make this difficult? Is this funny to you?'

I felt tears well up. 'What? What did I do wrong?'

'Nothing. Nothing. I'm sorry. For God's sake, don't cry.'

'I'm not crying,' I sobbed. 'But I ... don't know what you want and I've ... done something wrong.'

'No, no you haven't. Here.' He pulled out a paint-stained rag. On the grounds I couldn't make it any more revolting, I blew my nose and handed it back.

'My, you're a thorough girl, aren't you?'

I couldn't help a watery smile.

'Oh God, I've done this all wrong.'

'You certainly have,' said Thomas.

Done what? What was going on? I had that awful feeling you get when everyone knows what's going on but you. Things started to clench inside. My last day was ruined.

He turned his chair to face me and took my hand. 'I've made a complete pig's ear of this. Let's regard that as my practice swing and begin again. OK, here goes.

'Jenny. We each have things the other needs. I need money to finish restoring this old place. It eats money but it's my home and I love it. I hope you will too. With money I can begin to paint again and pick up my reputation. It would be a new beginning for me.

'You – you need a home. You need to get away from Julia and Richard. I know they've looked after you and you've wanted for nothing. Except a life, opportunities, and fun, of course. I can give you a home. You can live here with me. You'll have this house and the gardens to play with. I'll introduce you to a few people if you wish. Or not. Whatever you want to do. The point is, there's a whole world out there and it's time you were part of it. Frankly, if you don't do it now then you probably never will. Is that what you want, Jenny?' His voice softened. 'To spend every single day of your life doing exactly the same thing, at exactly the same time, with exactly the same people? For the rest of your life? Don't you want to travel a little? Get out there? Not know what each day will bring? I can help you. I will help you. We can help each other. I can't see a downside to this.'

He was picking up speed now.

‘And you don’t have to worry about ... you know. I’m a selfish sod, but I’m not that bad. I shan’t be imposing myself on you. And if you ... well, if you were to meet someone ... then I’m not going to be ... As long as you’re discreet, of course,’ said the most indiscreet man in the county. ‘I just think – there’s a way we can both get what we want and need. It’s quick, it’s painless, and we both benefit. What do you think?’

I stared at him.

‘You can speak now.’

From somewhere, I found a voice. ‘You’re asking me ... to ... move in with you?’

‘No. No, of course not.’

I felt as if I’d been kicked in the stomach. How stupid am I?

‘I’m asking if you would like to marry me.’

And now I’d been kicked in the heart.

He was racing on again. You can’t shut Russell Checkland up for long.

‘I admit it wasn’t my first choice, but there’s no way your uncle’s going to let you live with me without the protection of marriage vows and actually, he’d be right.’

That knocked the gloss off things a little.

‘No,’ said Thomas. ‘*Give him credit for a little honesty. He hasn’t drowned you in a load of old twaddle about you being the most beautiful woman in the world and how deeply he loves you.*’

Russell was ploughing on.

‘We’ve known each other a long time.’

We’d played together occasionally as children.

‘I like you, you like me. At least I hope you do. I think we could live very comfortably together. We’re both putting into the deal so we’d be equal partners. I think we could have a nice life together. What do you think?’

Rain lashed against the windows. The dishwasher whirled away to itself.

‘*You should say something,*’ said Thomas. ‘*It’s only polite.*’

‘What? What can I say? What should I say? What shall I do?’

‘*Seriously?*’ said Thomas, looking round. ‘*Do whatever you want to do.*’

‘But ...’

‘*No, Jenny. Don’t do what you think other people would want you to do. Don’t do what you think is the right thing to do. Do what you want to do.*’

Russell nudged my coffee mug closer and I sipped gratefully.

‘I know this is a bit of a surprise to you. Well, quite a big surprise, probably. Well no, more like a huge shock, but you’ve stopped crying, you haven’t bolted for the door, and you haven’t said no. Can I be reasonably optimistic?’

He looked like a hopeful little boy. ‘I tell you what, I can see this has taken you by surprise. You need time to think it over before giving me an answer.’

I nodded.

'Finish your coffee first.'

I choked.

'That's better,' he said approvingly. 'I've got to say, it's a bit of a bummer when you propose to a girl and she looks like she's been hit by a truck. Take your time.'

He sat back and drummed his fingers on the table.

'You know,' said Thomas, *'as fortune hunters go, he's got to be the worst in the business. A more professional approach would have involved flowers, not buckets, a romantic meal for two, music ... and maybe a ring. This guy proposes to you in a dilapidated farmhouse to a background of dripping water and the second rinse cycle. Are you going to say yes?'*

'I don't know.'

'So that's a yes, then.'

'I didn't say that.'

'In a proposal, anything that isn't a no is a yes.'

'You're not helping.'

'I don't have to. You already know what you're going to do.'

'I know what I should do.'

'Not the same thing at all. You'd better get back to your prospective fiancé. I think he's going to burst.'

I looked at him, all shadowed eyes, rumpled hair and nervous energy. For a long, long moment I hovered on the brink of 'yes.' But even I have some pride.

'Francesca.'

He sat back, face falling. What did he expect? That he could sneak off to see her and I would provide a packed lunch? I had no intention of sitting quietly at home while a sniggering Rushford gossiped behind my back.

He looked at me, looked out of the window, looked down at his lap, looked back at me again, took my mug, and poured us both another coffee. 'I'll tell you the truth. I owe you that.'

I nodded.

'I worship her. She's the reason I live.'

Not many women get such an admission two minutes after a proposal of marriage. I was proud of my control. Thomas turned away from the window and stood behind Russell, where I could see him.

'When we met again in London, it was so good. She was so beautiful. She was nicer then, simpler. She laughed more. And she wanted to be with me. Every day brought something new and wonderful. Neither of us could do any wrong. Everything we touched turned to gold. I couldn't stop painting. It just poured out of me, I knew what I wanted to say. Pretty well everything I did was snatched up, I can't tell you what it was like. It was exciting, intoxicating. I thought it would go on for ever. And when she got that TV part I thought ... well, never mind.

'And then I woke up one morning and she was sitting by the bed with her

suitcases. I know what people said about her, but she did at least say goodbye to my face. Then she picked up her stuff and walked away.

‘Maybe if I’d cried, instead of getting drunk. Maybe if I hadn’t trashed all my work. Maybe I should have just carried on. I’d painted joy, maybe I should have painted despair. I drank instead. A lot.

‘And then, as you know, my father turned up. He settled my debts, although don’t think I didn’t pay one way or another. And pay and pay. I went off to the army – I didn’t care what I did them. I had some idea about serving my country, I suppose. Well, that didn’t work either. Back home I came and here she was. Only a few miles away.’

He sipped his coffee carefully.

‘I should have gone away. And stayed away. I couldn’t do it, I meant to keep away from her and then one day, there she was. Standing in front of me. No warning. No escape. She smiled. I was there. No control. No pride. She lifted her little finger and I left a smoking groove in the carpet.

‘But it’s not the same now. There are others involved. It’s wrong. But I thought – if I could just see her then maybe I could paint again. Maybe it would all come back. Maybe it will be as it was.’

‘*You see,*’ said Thomas very softly, ‘*not one single word of love.*’

‘And was it?’

‘Not yet.’

I had a sudden moment of clarity. It wasn’t Francesca, as such, that he wanted. It was what she represented. That was what he wanted back. That time when everything he painted was golden and he felt like the king of the world. But you can’t go back. You can never go back.

I felt so sorry for him. I had envied him. All this time I’d been living my little life and he’d been out there, at the centre of his world, full of life and energy. But there was always a downside and it usually involved pain and suffering and I was looking at the result in front of me. In that minute, my heart went out to him. I reached out my hand.

He took it and held it hard. ‘I swear to you, if you marry me I will never do one single thing to hurt you. You have my word. I’m not a complete bastard, you know. You’ll be safe with me.’

I had no stupid ideas about redemption. That doesn’t happen. But one day she’d walk away from him again. Whether she married Daniel Palmer or not, she would walk away. And he might not survive a second time. And when that happened – and it would – this time there should be someone there for him. Someone to stop him destroying the things that meant most to him. I knew why he had done it. One pain to cancel out another. But Francesca wasn’t the only thing he missed. He was grieving for his lost paintings too and didn’t know it.

I closed my mind to the oncoming fury and strife. The next few days would not be easy at all.

He read my thoughts. ‘I’ll make sure it all falls on me. I’ll be there.’

'And I will too,' said Thomas. 'I'm here for as long as you need me.'

What could go wrong?

Of course, I should have asked questions. I should have asked what the marriage would actually entail. What would he get out of it – apart from the money? How would I benefit – apart from gaining a home? I should have asked about what he expected from me and what I could expect from him. About children. About the future. How would we make it work? The day to day, nuts and bolts bits of two people living together. And most of all, I should have talked about Francesca. Asked proper questions I mean, not just accepted his blithe assurance ...

I should have made a better effort. Words circled my head but none of them touched down. I should have made an attempt to shift the log jam inside me. But I'd had a brief, a wonderful glimpse of a bright, far-off country.

I said yes.

Of course, that was the easy bit.

'What are you doing tomorrow?' he asked.

'Finishing the dining room,' I said, determined to put off speaking to my family for at least the next decade. I had no idea at all how I was to explain I would be marrying a man I'd known for less than a month and who was notorious for his public pursuit of their daughter. Who had dumped him. Put like that I could hardly explain it to myself.

'OK, yes, you're right. One job at a time,' said my easily distracted fiancé. 'I'll ring and make an appointment with your uncle for ... Wednesday morning. I'll come to you afterwards and we'll see your aunt together. I want you to try not to worry too much. It's going to be a little difficult, but what can they actually do, after all? A few minutes' unpleasantness and we're done.'

We finished the dining room the next day. Russell tried to get Andrew for the weekend to help move the furniture but he said he and Tanya were going away. They did, however, agree to join us in Rushford for a small celebration on Wednesday evening.

'We'll need to relax a bit after spending the afternoon talking to your ghastly relatives,' he said breezily and none of us realised that lively though that day would be, the evening was to be even more exciting.

Wednesday came and I seriously considered staying in bed all day. Thomas made me get up. I dressed carefully and sat and watched the clock, stomach churning.

Just before noon, I heard a car pull up and stood on tiptoe to peer out of the dormer window. It wasn't Russell. It was Uncle Richard. Something was wrong. He never came home during the day.

I turned helplessly to Thomas,

'You don't know what's happened,' he said. 'Don't panic yet.'

'Uncle Richard said no, and now they're going to send me away.'

'It isn't in Uncle Richard's power to say no. You're twenty-eight years old. You can do as you please.'

‘They’ll lock me away.’

‘No, they won’t. *The only locks are the ones inside your own head. I know this is hard, but it’s vital you stay calm. Don’t allow them to agitate you. Try and deal with things one at a time, quietly and with restraint. This may well be your only chance. Take it.*’

It’s all very well saying ‘keep calm’ but not half so easy to do. I was well aware of the potential for disaster and it looked as if I would be facing it on my own. Where the hell was Russell? Had he been frightened away? Had he changed his mind? Had Francesca suddenly said yes, and he’d forgotten all about me?

‘Stop that,’ said Thomas, quite sharply for him. ‘*Stop torturing yourself. There’s any number of good reasons why he’s not here yet. Can you hold the fort until he is?*’

‘Yes,’ I said. And then with more determination, ‘Yes, I can.’

‘Good girl.’

We heard a step on the stair.

‘Good luck.’

Uncle Richard tapped on the door. It would never be Aunt Julia. The last time she was up here was to supervise the hanging of my new curtains, about ten years ago.

I threw myself into a chair and picked up a book.

‘Upside down.’

I righted it and called, ‘Come in.’

‘Ah, Jenny, good morning.’

‘Hello.’

‘Can you come downstairs a minute please? Your aunt and I would like a quick word.’

I followed him down to the lounge, a symphony in pale blue and grey and with furniture I hadn’t realised was so desperately uncomfortable until I sprawled on Russell Checkland’s baggy, saggy stuff.

Aunt Julia was livid. Absolutely livid. I could see it in her restless pacing and the angry glitter in her eyes.

She wheeled round as I entered.

‘Go slowly,’ advised Thomas. ‘*Make her wait. It will either slow her down too, or she’ll explode. Either way is good. Just don’t let her rush you into saying or doing anything rash.*’

I wasn’t asked to sit down. I’d lived in this house twenty years and still I felt I had to be asked to sit down. That wasn’t right. I’d never minded before, but now I did. My heart rate slowed a little, my legs straightened, and I lifted my head.

‘Well done.’

‘What have you been doing? What on earth do you think you’ve been doing? What have you been doing to make that disgusting man think –?’

‘That’s enough, Julia. Please sit down and calm yourself. Until we hear

what Jenny has to say this may be no more than a storm in a tea cup. Now, Jenny,' he continued kindly, 'I think you must know what this is about.'

Kind or not, I still hadn't been asked to sit down. I was standing on the rug like a naughty schoolgirl and I was becoming a little angry.

'Good for you, but use it, don't waste it.'

I raised my eyebrows at Uncle Richard. I would make him say it.

He coughed quietly. 'This morning I had a visit from Russell Checkland. He seems to be under the impression that you have agreed to marry him and visited my office to inform me of that fact. Is this actually true?'

I took a breath, but Aunt Julia burst in from the other side of the room.

'Of course it's not true, Richard. How could it be? I can't believe you didn't throw him out of your office.'

'Well, he's quite a large young man and he was perfectly polite about it. And it's really not good for business for clients to see people pitched, willy-nilly from our premises. Besides, as you can imagine, I questioned him closely and he was very definite. He has proposed marriage to our niece and she has accepted him.'

She turned to me. 'Say this isn't true. Tell us he's lying.'

Since I couldn't do any such thing, I remained silent.

'Do I take it,' said Uncle Richard, 'that your silence means he is, in fact, telling the truth?'

I took another breath, but Aunt Julia was off again. 'I don't care whether it's true or not. It's nonsense. It will never happen. She doesn't know what she's doing and he's taken advantage of her. I want him prosecuted to the full extent of the law.'

'My dear,' he said, somewhat wearily. 'May I point out that we still don't know what we're dealing with here, and until Jenny actually gets to tell us, we never will.'

'Hold on – there's a car. Yes, the hero has arrived. Better late than never, but that's a Checkland for you. And if he stopped off to buy more buckets on the way I think you might have a legitimate grievance.'

In the distance, I heard the bell ring and Mrs Finch's voice at the door. A few seconds later, Russell walked in. He was tidily dressed although his tie was askew already and his hair beginning to escape the restraint of hair gel.

'Hello, everyone,' he said cheerily, apparently not noticing Defcon 1 in the drawing room, to say nothing of a traumatised fiancée rooted to the hearthrug.

'There you are, future wife. You look very pretty today. I brought you these. Give us a kiss then.'

With these provocative words he handed me a bunch of roses and kissed me on the cheek. I seriously wondered if he was too self-absorbed even to notice the atmosphere, but I'd misjudged him. He took my hand, squeezed it tightly, and led me to the sofa, sitting beside me and letting go only to say, 'Good God, these cushions are uncomfortable. Don't you dare buy any like these for our place, Jenny,' and tossed a couple of Aunt Julia's carefully

chosen scatter cushions to the floor.

As conciliatory openings went, this was a complete non-starter. Thomas moved closer.

‘There’s no way out of this, Jenny. He’s going for broke here. Probably a good idea but you’re going to need balls of steel for this. Just hang in there. We’ll laugh about this one day.’

I was never going to laugh again.

‘So,’ he said cheerfully, ‘what are we all talking about then?’

Or maybe I would.

As you may suppose,’ said Uncle Richard, ‘we are discussing Jenny’s alleged engagement to you.’

‘Discussing? Is that what it’s called now? I suspect it’s more accurate to say that Julia has been emoting to such an extent that Jenny hasn’t been able to get a word in edgeways. Let me save everyone a great deal of time and effort. Your niece, that’s Jenny here, has done me the enormous honour of agreeing to be my wife. Sorry I’m a bit late,’ he said, turning to me. ‘I stopped off at the Register Office. They were very helpful and gave me all sorts of stuff. Here, have a look through this lot, tell me what you want, choose a date, and we’ll do the deed.’

Aunt Julia was on her feet again. I turned cold and sweaty and for a moment thought I might throw up. She looked terrifying in her rage.

‘Margaret Thatcher with added attitude,’ said Thomas. *‘Don’t let any of this distress you. You’re going to be fine. He won’t let anything happen to you and there’s three of us and only two of them.’*

Russell still had a tight grip on my hand. His was warm, dry, and steady and I felt heat beginning to creep back into my body. He didn’t look in the least bothered and I began to suspect he was actually enjoying himself.

‘This so-called marriage will never take place,’ she declared. ‘As her legal guardians, we withhold consent –’

‘She’s twenty-eight, Julia, she doesn’t need your consent. She can do as she pleases.’

No, I couldn’t, and he’d obviously forgotten that. I tugged on his hand. He raised my hand to his lips and winked at me. No, he hadn’t forgotten. ‘Will you trust me?’

I nodded, but only once, still not sure.

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Checkland.’ Her voice dripped icy politeness. ‘Perhaps if you’d had the courtesy to consult her guardians before upsetting my niece with this ridiculous proposal then we could have explained to you and without any distress to poor Jenny, just why exactly this marriage, any marriage, can never take place.’

‘Why do you keep calling her poor Jenny?’ he interrupted. ‘She appears perfectly normal to me. She’s not deficient in any way or missing anything vital. You’re not, are you?’ he added in a loud whisper to me. ‘Because if you are then this is the moment to tell me. I can take it, I promise you.’

I shook my head. Once again, he'd defused the moment.

'Now, anything else before we go?'

He began to make all the preparations necessary for extricating oneself from one of Aunt Julia's sofas.

'Bloody hell, Jenny, we may be here for life. That remark I made about the cushions applies to the sofas as well.'

'Really?' said Aunt Julia nastily. 'Do tell us, Mr Checkland, with whose money will you be buying these new sofas?'

Russell grinned at her.

Her face darkened alarmingly. Thomas snorted.

'Language,' I said, in my head.

'Am I to understand, Russell, that you will be supporting your wife on her money alone?' asked Uncle Richard, and I guessed this was the crunch. If he showed any weakness now, or tried to explain, or gloss over, or lie ...

'Well, mostly yes. Although there's the money from renting out grazing, of course. 50p per sheep, you know,' he explained to Aunt Julia and I think we all enjoyed her expression of baffled confusion. 'And they improve the land no end. And it's up to them to maintain the boundaries. Not the sheep, of course, the tenants. So as you can see, it's a sweet deal.'

Uncle Richard, in his own way, was a great deal more relentless than Aunt Julia.

'So would it be fair to state then, that you bring nothing at all to this unequal marriage and you are marrying my niece solely for her money? Your father would turn in his grave at such behaviour from a Checkland.'

That really was the wrong thing to say.

Russell was on his feet in one fluid movement. I came up with him, ready to do what I could. His voice was far more icy than anything my aunt could never achieve. She was tall but he was taller. He looked down his nose at her, but spoke to Uncle Richard.

'I think, sir, that in the drama of the moment you have become confused when you speak of inequality. Perhaps you have been so taken up listening to Mrs Kingdom's unhelpful statements that you have not had time to consider the benefits to your niece of having a husband in possession of a twelve-roomed Victorian farmhouse with extensive outbuildings, stables, and thirty-three acres of prime grazing land, with a conservative estimate of, at the last count, fractionally over £750,000, fifty per cent of which is being transferred into my future wife's name even as we speak. I know my fiancée was well provided for by her parents, but I shall be astonished (although very pleased, of course) if she brings anything like that sum to our marriage. Being in possession of these facts, sir, I would be grateful if you could indicate the areas of inequality that give you so much concern.'

I stood beside him, staunch but shaking, oscillating wildly between fear, admiration, and now, hope.

Uncle Richard sat back, looking thoughtful. Aunt Julia, however, was not

done.

‘That’s as maybe,’ she said, dismissing twelve rooms and thirty-three acres with a flick of her wrist. ‘But I must inform you, Mr Checkland, that po – that Jenny’s precarious state of health precludes her from living anywhere except quietly in her own home, here with us.’

This was crunch time for me. I would be locked away. Once again, he stepped in.

‘I knew it,’ he said to me. ‘You’re a vampire and you have to come home every night to your coffin in the cellar.’

I inhaled the lovely smell of warm ginger biscuits and whispered, ‘I live in the attic.’

‘Then you’re an android and have to return to plug yourself in every night? Not a problem – we’ll get batteries. Or – how about a really long extension lead?’

He was doing it on purpose. Aunt Julia was unused to being mocked. She swelled alarmingly. I was surprised to find I was almost enjoying this.

‘If, Mr Checkland, you had taken the trouble to become acquainted with my niece instead of just meeting her at a party and then making this ridiculous proposal so soon afterwards, then you would know very well why Jenny should continue to live here.’

She turned to me and her face softened. ‘Jenny, I have your best interests at heart. We both do. This – man – has met you once, decided you can be easily influenced, and is here solely because he’s desperate for money and can’t get it any other way. Please don’t allow yourself to believe what he tells you. Far from owning a large and prosperous home as he’s led you to believe, his house is falling down – a virtual ruin. You’re his last-ditch attempt to avoid having to sell up.

‘And besides ...’ but she stopped there. Even Aunt Julia couldn’t bring herself to mention the most important reason I shouldn’t marry him was because of the scandalous link with her daughter. I saw her lips move, but she just couldn’t get it out.

Russell watched her struggle for an interested minute and then said brightly, ‘Oh, none of that is really a problem. You’ve obviously forgotten Jenny and I have known each other off and on for about fifteen years now. She’s been at Frogmorton this last fortnight, helping with the painting and what-not, so she’s got a pretty good idea of the state of the place. And frankly, Julia, I can’t see there would be any problems with her living quietly in the country, happy and busy and most importantly, included.’

‘Are you telling me she’s been *working* there? For two weeks? You’ve been making her work?’

‘Well, you’re hard to please. First you’re peeved because you think we’ve hardly met and now you’re all bent out of shape because we have. You need to make up your mind, Julia, so we can move on.’

Aunt Julia made a valiant comeback. ‘Her doctors ...’

‘Oh yes,’ he interrupted. ‘I knew there was something. Jenny, I’m sorry. Another reason I was late is because I was on the phone to Peter Westall. You won’t know him, but our mothers were pretty good friends and so are we. Anyway – Julia, you’ll be thrilled to hear this – he’s one of the leading authorities in his field and he’s promised to see Jenny very quickly if we care to make an appointment. I think it would be quite useful to get Jenny checked out by someone with fresh eyes and ideas and get his recommendations, and then we can all rest easy knowing that Jenny is benefiting from top-notch expertise. What do you think?’

She still wasn’t giving up. ‘I have always had complete confidence in her current –’

‘I’m sure you have,’ he said, smiling at her. ‘And the Jenny we see today is a testament to your care for her.’

There was something going on here.

‘No, I’m all at sea, too,’ said Thomas.

‘Right, well, if that’s it then we’ll be off. We’re meeting my cousin and his friend for a meal. Do you fancy a trip to the cinema, Jenny? There’s some sort of Chain Saw/Zombie/Vampire/Creepy Psychopath thing on. Or Hugh Grant, of course, if you prefer,’ he said, catching a glimpse of my aunt’s face.

She opened her mouth.

‘Let it go, Julia,’ said Uncle Richard.

‘But ...’

‘That’s enough.’

‘Lovely to have met you again,’ said Hurricane Russell, ushering me out of the door. ‘Get a warm coat, Jenny, it’s cold outside. No idea what time we’ll be back. Do you have a key?’

I shook my head.

Wordlessly, Uncle Richard opened a drawer in the little hall table and handed him one. It was that easy.

Russell handed it to me.

‘Here you go, Jenny. Don’t lose it. I’ll get you a key ring. You’ll need keys for my place – sorry – our place as well. What a lot there is to think about. My head’s whirling. Bye.’

He slammed the front door behind us.

‘Well, he said, climbing into his diseased Land Rover. ‘That went well.’

We pulled out into the road to the alarm of a passing white van. There was hooting.

‘*Look on the bright side,*’ said Thomas. ‘*The way he drives, we’ll all be dead long before he can marry you so none of this really matters.*’

We clattered down the High Street. Watching normal people doing normal things was somehow reassuring. Gradually I felt the tension drain away, leaving me sick, tired, and weak.

‘I’m going to drop you here,’ he said. ‘Get us a table in The Copper Kettle and I’ll park this beast. I’ll be with you in five minutes.’

He pulled over and it seemed to me there was less outraged hooting. Maybe I was beginning not to notice it either.

He drove off.

Thomas and I stood on the pavement and drew breath. 'Do you think this is how it's going to be from now on?' I asked him.

'With a bit of luck. Shall we get out of the rain?'

We ducked into The Copper Kettle and only when I was actually in there with the smell of fresh ground coffee all around me did I realise how much I was gagging for some tea. I stood at the 'Please wait here to be seated' sign. And stood and stood. All the waitresses seemed to be busy doing something at the other end, although at this time of the day and the weather being what it was, the place was almost deserted.

I stood for a long time. Beside me, Thomas shifted but said nothing. Occasionally, one of them would glance over and there would be giggling. I felt my face grow hot. Time passed.

'Stand your ground,' said Thomas.

'Why?'

'You'll see.'

'I don't need any more grief today.'

'Just wait and see what happens.'

More time passed. I didn't know whether to just go and sit at an empty table or what. I looked around the room. I could sit anywhere, but the board said to wait. On the other hand, I'd just fought a great battle. Well, I'd stood to one side while a great battle was fought on my behalf, but I had been on the winning team, so ...

'Why are you still standing here?' said Russell, bounding through the door at the speed of light. He looked down to the clump of waitresses at the far end. Seeing him, one of them detached herself and came up to us, a practised smile on her face.

'Welcome,' she said to him. 'This way, please.'

He didn't move. She repeated herself a little more loudly. Finally, he seemed to see her.

'No, not you,' he said, and I gasped. He looked over her shoulder. 'Hey, Sharon.'

A very pretty, very plump girl came out from round the back of a screen. I guessed she was the most junior member of staff and, as such, would be doing most of the work.

'Hello, Mr Checkland,' she said, shyly.

'Hello there, how are you? Jenny, this is Sharon. She's Mrs Crisp's niece.'

We smiled at each other. Her face was beautiful with huge brown eyes and blonde ringlets. Her teeth and skin were perfect. But she was a large girl and her hips bumped some of the tables as she passed. One of the girls laughed. I watched her blush painfully and decided I would never come here again.

'The staff here are hopeless,' said Russell, and the waitress's smile abruptly

disappeared. 'Can you find us a table please, Sharon?'

'Of course,' she said and led the way to the one in the window. She produced menus as we got settled. Russell ordered tea. 'Teacakes. Plenty of them. And when we've finished those, we'll want to have a look at the cake trolley, please.'

She scribbled, smiled beautifully, and walked away, knocking against a chair as she went.

'*What a lovely girl,*' said Thomas. '*The face of an Irish princess.*'

I looked at him in surprise.

'*I met one once.*'

'So,' said Russell. 'How do *you* think it went?'

'Peter Westall is a hairdresser, isn't he? Or a chain of chemists. Or something you spray on athlete's foot. You made him up.'

He just laughed again. I obviously wasn't going to get an answer. Maybe it was best I didn't know. Plausible deniability.

Sharon brought our order and Russell set to as if he hadn't seen food for days instead of a couple of hours.

I drank my tea, got a refill, nibbled a tea cake, had another, and allowed myself to be tempted to a strawberry tart.

'Afternoon tea,' he said. 'Best meal of the day. Everyone has happy memories of afternoon tea. Nothing to beat it after an emotional day. Do you want that cream slice?'

I shook my head and then he had a custard tart as well. I looked at his long, lean body and pondered yet another of the world's injustices.

He looked up and the bill materialised seconds afterwards. He pulled out his wallet and said to Sharon, 'Do you pool your tips here?'

She shook her head regretfully. She was at the bottom of the food chain, tip-wise.

He settled the bill and then stood up, ostentatiously holding a £20 note between his long fingers. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Excellent service.' She went red with pleasure and gratification and tucked it safely away.

He helped me on with my coat and made his usual dash for the door. Another waitress, maybe hoping for a generous tip herself, opened it for him.

He lowered his voice but I heard him quite clearly. He said, 'Don't ever ignore this lady again,' and the harmonics in his voice lifted the hairs on my neck. And then he was out of the door and striding down the pavement.

I stood in the rain and watched him go. People scurried past, heads down against the rain. Everyone was eager to get home. Shop lights were reflected in the glistening pavements. I suddenly felt more alone than I ever had in my entire life.

'*Tell me,*' said Thomas, quietly.

'It's all right for him. He'll go back home to Frogmorton at the end of the day but I have to go back to Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard and I'll be alone.'

'*No, you won't. You're never alone. I'll be with you. I'll help you think*

what to say and protect you while you say it. We'll manage, Jenny. Just like we always do.'

'Nothing's actually changed, though, has it? I'm just going to be overlooked by a whole new set of people. I've burned my bridges for nothing.'

'I doubt your aunt and uncle will say anything to you tonight. And possibly not tomorrow either. And here he comes. Wonder how far he got before he realised he'd lost you.'

Russell and I looked at each other in the rain.

'Are we having our first row?'

I shook my head.

'Are you having second thoughts?'

'Tell him,' advised Thomas. *'This is normal. The two of you need to establish ground rules. He'll stand up for you and protect you and kill dragons for you, but he won't always know that sometimes, he's the dragon.'*

He pulled me gently out of the rain. 'What is it?'

I marshalled words. 'I'm leaving the ... safety and security of my home for a whole new world. I have just put ... my entire future in your hands and I'm frightened.'

He said nothing. Oh God, had he changed his mind? Cars swished past in the rain. Hardly anyone was about now. Thomas moved to my side, standing really close for reassurance.

'Do you want me to take you home?'

Did I? At that moment, my attic room felt pretty good. Thomas and I could watch a little TV, argue over the news. I could make some hot chocolate and go to bed and listen to the rain on the roof.

'And tomorrow?' said Thomas. *'What will you do tomorrow night? Watch a little TV, drink hot chocolate, and go to bed? Of course, it might not be raining, so that will be different, won't it?'*

'Thomas, I don't know what to do.'

'Then go to the cinema. Even if you do change your mind, at least we'll have seen a film and we haven't done that for ages. Let's at least have a night out and we'll decide what to do in the morning.'

'I'd like to go to the cinema.'

'Then you shall,' He pulled my arm through his and we set off, albeit at a slower pace. 'Are you feeling a bit overwhelmed?'

I nodded.

'I should have realised. But listen, Jenny, you must speak up. I'm selfish and I'm not bright. You need to tell me things. Please don't be one of those awful women who expect me to guess what's wrong and then sulk when I don't.'

Francesca? I wondered.

'Just what I was thinking.'

I nodded. 'All right. I promise to complain ... bitterly at every opportunity.'

‘That’s my girl.’

Tanya and Andrew were waiting in the foyer, arguing about which film to watch.

‘Jenny?’ said Russell. ‘It’s your night, you choose.’

I chose the Chain Saw/Zombie/etc. film to the instant approbation of Thomas, Russell, and Tanya. Andrew wanted to see something with sub-titles. We stared at him in disbelief.

‘What?’ he said, ‘Unlike you troglodytes I have intellectual depth.’

‘No you don’t,’ said Russell. ‘You have the intellectual capacity of a small rock. You’re a Checkland. I won’t have you sully the family name like that.’

Russell bought the tickets, Andrew bought the popcorn and in we went. I sat on the end, next to the aisle. Thomas stood next to me. I watched his face in the flickering light. He thoroughly enjoyed every minute. I occasionally felt guilty about him. I didn’t get out much, so neither did he.

Russell ate all his popcorn and most of mine.

I stared at the screen and worried.

Chapter Four

Russell was hungry again after the film. We stood and they argued over Indian or Chinese, settling on Chinese, which had the advantage of being just around the corner. They bickered amiably amongst themselves as we ate. I nibbled bits of this and that. Thomas wandered around looking at the décor and the other diners, obviously determined to extract maximum enjoyment from our night out. The most exciting bit however, was yet to come.

There was a toast to our future happiness. Tanya wanted to see the ring. Andrew wanted to know when. And where. We were obliged to disappoint both of them.

Andrew sighed and pulled out a notebook. 'We'll make a list.'

'I am very sorry,' said Tanya. 'I have told him this is not acceptable behaviour in public. Usually he only does this in the privacy of our home. I am mortified.'

'So,' said Andrew, unheeding. 'Rings. Register Office. Flowers. Guest list. Reception. Honeymoon. Pay your vet. How much of this have you actually already organised, Russ?'

The silence spoke for itself.

Russell roused himself to sudden activity. 'Right. Jenny. You, me, tomorrow, buy rings, make an appointment at the Register Office – we both have to go. Do you want flowers? I'm a bit skint at the moment.'

I opened my mouth.

'No, it's a generous offer, but I'll pay for our wedding. If you want to, you can buy your wedding dress, but that's it. OK?'

'I was going to say I don't want flowers.'

'Oh. Well. That's OK, then.'

'I have a very good idea, Jenny,' said Tanya. 'On Friday, my day is free. If yours is too, would you like to shop for your dress? We can make a day of it with lunch as well. There will be no men. It will be a very nice day.'

'Can I come?'

'Of course you can.'

'Yes,' I said gratefully to Tanya. 'That is a very good idea.'

'How can it be a very nice day,' objected Andrew, 'if I won't be there? On the other hand, of course, Jenny – sensible girl – is obviously tired of you already, Russ. I'm only amazed it took her so long.' He tore the page out of his notebook. 'There you go, mate, Wedding 101. You'll live to be grateful to me yet.'

I leaned over to look. 'Does it have sub-titles?'

Andrew regarded me severely. 'I used to think you were too good for Russell but now I think you deserve each other.'

We split up outside, going our separate ways. I got a hug from Tanya and a

peck on the cheek from Andrew.

Russell and I set off for his Land Rover. The rain had finally let up, but it was cold and we walked briskly.

'Down here,' said Thomas indicating the alley behind the post office. *'It's much quicker.'*

I automatically turned off and Russell, in the middle of telling me how he'd come to buy that collection of rust known as his Land Rover, turned with me. Ten paces in, a dark shadow slipped out from behind a wheelie bin.

It wasn't that dark; there was a lamppost at each end and they easily gave out enough light to make out the knife being waved in a curiously non-threatening manner. A slightly squeaky voice said, 'Give me your bag, lady.'

Russell pulled me behind him. Thomas stepped forward. I really should have been scared, but everything happened so quickly. I peered out to see what was going on.

'Give me your bag.'

I said, 'I haven't got one.'

'What?'

'It's true,' said Russell calmly. 'She doesn't carry one. She expects me to pay for everything.'

The knife now pointed at Russell.

'Then give me your money.'

'All right. I'm going to reach for my wallet now. I'll do it slowly so don't be alarmed.'

'Just do it, mister.'

Russell pulled out his wallet and offered it up, deceptively casual. The next second, he'd knocked the knife away with one hand and punched our assailant on the nose with the other.

The knife fell to the ground with a clatter and he kicked it away under the wheelie bin. The figure took two quick steps backwards, sat down hard and burst into tears. I picked up his wallet.

'Jenny, would you go and stand over there, please.'

I did take two paces to the side, but no further, because I wanted to see what would happen next.

'Did you see that?' said Thomas. *'Pretty cool. You can tell he's been in the army.'*

I'd forgotten that.

For a long time there was silence in the alley apart from the distant swish of traffic in the still wet streets and the odd gulping sob.

Russell stood with his hands on his hips, quietly waiting. For what, I don't know, but Thomas and I stood quietly too.

Finally, he said, 'Come on, lad, don't sit there in the wet. Stand up now.'

The figure shambled to its feet and unfolded. I caught just a glimpse of a frightened, white face, covered in dark blotches, a thin, stick-like body and big hands and feet. He must still be growing because his wrists and ankles

stuck out from his clothing and his ears stuck out from his head like wing mirrors. His hair was just a dark, clogged, dirty mass. Not designer dirt, just ordinary, sleeping in an alley dirt. He was a pitiful sight, shaking with fear and cold. Blood trickled from his nose.

'*Oh, dear,*' said Thomas in distress, and went to do what he did best. The lad had no idea he was there, but something must have got through, because the gulping slowed to just the occasional sniff.

'Well?' said Russell. 'What have you got to say for yourself?'

He just shook his head, staring at his feet. I knew that feeling.

'Come on, you were full of it five minutes ago. What's this all about, then?'

There was no reply.

'Last chance before I hand you over.'

He muttered something.

'What? What did you say? I haven't got all night and this lady's cold.'

'I was hungry.'

He was too. I could see it in his hollow eyes and cheeks. I know most teenage boys look like toast racks, but this was a different kind of hunger. A desperate kind of hunger. And there was a really bad smell. Not just stale body and dirty clothes, but a sharp tang of urine, as well. I wondered if he'd wet himself when Russell hit him.

'So what's the story here?'

He sighed and knuckled his eyes, like a child. He looked exhausted too. And now that I could see him more clearly, those dark blotches were bruises. He'd been pretty well knocked about even before Russell had a go at him.

'You on the streets?'

He nodded.

'So what's the money for? Drugs? Booze?'

He shook his head. 'Food.'

'There's shelters. I think there's one near St Stephen's Clinic.'

He nodded. 'I went.'

'And?'

'I was too late for that night. When I went outside they were waiting.'

I grew suddenly fearful. Thomas looked at me, but I nodded for him to stay where he was.

'Who was waiting?'

'Some men. I didn't really see. They hang around to have fun with ... When I came out they pushed me over. Grabbed my things – what I had. Kicked me around a bit. Then they pissed on me and walked off.'

More silence. Thomas moved a little closer. Unconsciously, the boy leaned towards him. I looked at Russell to see what he would do. It never occurred to me that he would hand the boy over as he threatened. I don't think it occurred to him either.

I shivered again and that broke the spell.

'Come on.'

‘What? Where? Where are you taking me? I’m not going anywhere with you.’ He started to back away and collided with the wheelie bin.

Russell sighed. ‘Relax, will you. Jenny, tell him.’

I did my best. ‘He’s OK. A ... bit odd. Noisy. Shouts a lot. Don’t worry.’

He turned to me. ‘A bit odd? You describe me as a bit odd?’

‘It sounds better than totally ... bizarre. I was trying to reassure him.’

‘By telling him I’m odd?’

‘You want me to lie? Fine.’ I turned to the boy. ‘He’s completely ... normal.’

Thomas was laughing. ‘*Just offer him a meal and he’ll go anywhere.*’

I struggled a bit. It had been a long day and it wasn’t getting any shorter. ‘We’ll ... give you ... food.’

‘What?’

‘She’s tired and sometimes words aren’t easy for her. She’s saying come with us and we’ll give you a hot meal.’

‘Can I get my stuff?’

‘I thought it was all stolen.’

‘It was. This is other stuff I need.’

He disappeared behind the wheelie bin and came back with a large flattened cardboard box and a carrier bag full of what looked like damp rags.

‘What’s that?’

‘What’s left. They didn’t want this’

‘You don’t need the cardboard box.’

‘Yes, I do. It’s hard to get one this size.’

That was wet too. He struggled to get it under his arm. Russell told him he wouldn’t need it, but he wouldn’t let it go, so off we set.

Russell made him walk in front of us. We walked along behind and Thomas brought up the rear. I said to Thomas, ‘What’s the box for?’

‘*He sleeps on it. The ground can be very cold and wet.*’

‘Oh.’

‘*And he needs to hang on to it in case it gets pinched.*’

‘By whom?’

‘*Other people on the streets, or those who regard the homeless as legitimate sport.*’

‘Oh.’

‘*For some people, the world is sometimes not a very nice place.*’

Russell made him sit in the back and promise to behave. He nodded, still clutching his bed and bag.

We achieved escape velocity, hurtled round the Whittington roundabout, and sling-shotted to Frogmorton. When Russell opened up the back he was sprawled on the floor.

‘Oh, sorry, mate.’

He scrambled out and stood looking around him. The light was still on in the kitchen.

‘Come on,’ said Russell, and we all trailed after him.

Mrs Crisp was in her dressing gown making cocoa.

‘There you are, just in time. Would you like some cocoa? She broke off as she got a good look at the guest. ‘Who’s this?’

‘That’s a point,’ said Russell. ‘Who are you?’

‘Kevin.’

We waited, but there was no more.

‘Just Kevin?’

He nodded, defiantly.

‘Police looking for you, Kevin?’

Mrs Crisp pulled the neck of her dressing gown closer and looked round for a rolling pin. Or possibly a steak hammer.

He shook his head.

‘Anyone looking for you?’

Even I could feel the sudden sadness. ‘No, no one.’

‘No parents?’

He stared at his feet. ‘No.’

‘How old are you?’

‘I was eighteen last week.’

I felt so sorry for him. Other teenagers have parents who throw parties for their kids’ eighteenth. Or mark it with a special gift or a trip of some kind. Even I’d got a laptop. This kid had spent his eighteenth birthday on a wet pavement getting kicked and pissed on.

Mrs Crisp bustled forward. ‘That’s enough. Can someone please organise him a good hot bath and a change of clothes?’ She glared at Russell until he got the message.

‘Right, this way, Kevin.’ They disappeared into the house. I could hear them climbing the stairs. Mrs Crisp went to the fridge and started pulling out eggs, bacon, tomatoes – all the makings of a good breakfast.

Not wanting to intrude, I said shyly, ‘Can I help?’

‘Yes, of course. Thank you. Perhaps you’d like to make the toast. Lots of it, I think, and plenty of butter.’

I found the toaster and bread and set to, carefully buttering the toast and stacking it over the range to keep warm. I found the marmalade, and under Mrs Crisp’s instructions, laid the table. Thomas took himself into the corner out of the way.

About twenty minutes later they were back. Kevin wore an old black jogging suit with the cuffs turned back and the legs pooling around his ankles. His hair was wet and a surprising dark blond colour. The downside was that without the protective covering of dirt, the bruises were much more visible. He’d had more than a bit of a kicking.

‘There you are. Come and sit down.’ She pulled out a chair for him and, as he sat, laid a heaped plate in front of him. ‘Eggs, bacon, hash browns, tomatoes, mushrooms, and there’s plenty of toast and marmalade. Dig in.’

He did. It was a kind of feeding frenzy.

‘Slow down,’ said Russell, not unkindly, ‘or it’ll all come back up again. I’ll admit it’s good value to see your food go by more than once, but in this instance, it’s a bit of a waste. No one’s going to take it away from you so just slow down a bit.’

Kevin nodded, broke off to gulp down some tea, took a deep breath, and made an effort at table manners.

Russell, obviously feeling his guest eat shouldn’t eat alone, made himself a bacon sandwich and tucked in as well. I had a piece of toast and marmalade and Mrs Crisp got up and came back with a lemon drizzle cake and we all had a piece of that too.

‘So, Kevin,’ said Russell. ‘What’s your story then?’

It was more a question and answer session than a coherent narrative and he stopped for tea and another piece of cake. It all boiled down to a familiar and sad story. His father left. His mother, desperate for money and obviously feeling that any man was better than no man at all, took up with a man she probably wouldn’t have looked at before. It was made clear to Kevin that he was no longer welcome in his own home. Reading between the lines, his mother never lifted a finger to save him. Only seventeen and with poor exam results, he’d been unable to find work. He spent a little time staying with friends, but that petered out. Unable to get a job, he couldn’t find anywhere to live and, unable to provide an address, he couldn’t get a job. This was his first winter on the streets. Even after the bath, he still looked grubby. The dirt was more than skin deep. He looked exhausted, desperate, lonely, and deeply afraid. He kept looking around the kitchen, half afraid to stay and very afraid to leave. I wondered what Russell would do.

Obviously the bacon sandwich had lubricated his brain cells. ‘We can offer you a room for the night,’ he said. ‘It’s not very much but it’s dry and warm. Mrs Crisp will look you out some blankets. You’ve already got towels. We’ll give you breakfast tomorrow and then have a bit of a chat. There is a lock on the door if you want to use it.’

The poor lad was suddenly shattered. After nights without proper sleep and then a big meal on an empty stomach, he could hardly keep his eyes open. He did, however, remember to thank Mrs Crisp for the meal. Underneath the world’s most inefficient mugger was a nice boy.

We gathered up various bits and pieces and made our way to the stable block on the other side of the yard. Russell led the way, so when he stopped dead, I walked into him and Kevin walked into me. Thomas neatly sidestepped all of us.

‘I’ve just thought, do you smoke?’

‘No.’

‘You sure? It’s not a problem if you do, it just means I’ll put you in another room, but I need to know if you smoke.’

He shook his head. ‘No. Never tried and now I can’t afford it.’

‘OK, then.’

He opened the door to the stable block. In his big box at the end, Boxer stirred and stuck a sleepy but curious head out to look.

‘Oh, neat. A horse.’

Kevin dropped everything onto the tack table and went off to look. Boxer lowered his head and sniffed.

‘*Good job he’s had a bath,*’ muttered Thomas. ‘*You have no idea how snooty ex-racehorses can be.*’

‘Wow, this is really cool. What’s his name?’

‘Boxer.’

He reached a tentative hand and Boxer deigned to have his nose gently stroked.

Russell looked at me and wiggled his eyebrows. I had no idea what he was trying to say.

‘Come on, Kevin. This way.’

We climbed a rickety stair and he opened a door at the top and switched on a light. This must, once upon a time, have been the old feed store. It still retained a certain – atmosphere, but being made of wood, it was warm.

‘You can sleep here tonight. There’s a sleeping bag and a couple of extra blankets. Jenny has the pillows. I’m sorry there’s no bathroom. If you get caught short nip downstairs and pee in one of the buckets. You can blame it on Boxer.’

He smiled, but it was a poor effort.

‘Don’t rush to get up in the morning. Come over when you’re ready. You can use the bathroom and we’ll give you breakfast.’

He stopped.

Kevin was looking at him. I could see him thinking – then what?

I was wondering that myself.

‘OK, got everything you need?’

He was unpacking his sad little carrier bag. There were a couple of grimy T-shirts which he carefully spread out to dry, three socks (he’s a man, they can only do socks in odd numbers) and a battered Harry Potter with an old photo being used as a book mark. He put this on the floor and stood politely, waiting for us to go.

Russell seemed to be in another world again, so I pulled his sleeve.

‘Oh, right. Good night then.’

As we crossed the yard, I said, ‘Russell, he’s sleeping in an outbuilding on ... the floor.’

‘He’s dry, warm, fed, and safe. It’s the best thing that’s happened to him in weeks.’

‘What about tomorrow?’

‘Don’t know, Jenny. I’ll have to think about it. I’ll drive you home.’

I was glad to go. I was tired too.

It was well past midnight when we got back. I fumbled anxiously for my key.

Russell walked with me to the door. Various lights came on as we walked up the path. Russell stopped and looked around us but said nothing.

I was too tired to ask.

Finally, he said in a whisper, 'It's very neat, isn't it?'

I looked around with new eyes. After the shabby cheerfulness of Frogmorton, I suppose it was. Uncle Richard and Aunt Julia lived in a solid, respectable, detached house on the solid and respectable side of town and their property was immaculate. The extensive gardens, front and back, belonged to the conifer and heather style of horticulture, which means they required minimum maintenance, were always neat and looked exactly the same during all the seasons of the year – dull.

We tiptoed up the path and Russell opened the door for me. 'Goodnight, future wife,' and before I had time to worry about goodnight kisses, and with the unerring sense of timing that all men responsible for unwed females seem instinctively to possess, Uncle Richard appeared. He wore pyjamas and dressing gown and carried the local newspaper. He said nothing at all in a very meaningful way, but Russell remained unabashed.

'Good evening, Richard. Where was I? Oh, yes. Jenny, I'll pick you up at ten tomorrow. Don't be late – lots to do, people to see and so on. Sleep well.' He gave me an affectionate clap on the shoulder that made me stagger slightly and disappeared back down the path. I watched the lights flash on and off, marking his progress. His Land Rover started with a clatter and roared away into the night, leaving a sudden velvet silence.

Uncle Richard held the door for me. I remembered to keep the key.

'Uncle Richard, you didn't have to ... wait up for me,' I said, feeling very guilty because if we hadn't been feeding and housing a potential member of the criminal classes then I would have been home hours ago. Some instinct warned me not to mention Kevin.

He smiled slightly. 'I think you'll find that waiting up for young female members of his family is in every father's – and every uncle's – job description. Come into the kitchen a minute, please. I've left the milk on.'

I sat at the table while he poured himself a cup of hot milk. I shook my head when he offered me some. It was a kind gesture and now didn't seem to be the time to point out I'd lived here for twenty years and he still didn't know I hated milk.

He sat himself down opposite me.

Thomas yawned. '*Are we ever going to get to bed?*'

'Shh,' I said, because if Uncle Richard stirred his milk any more he'd go through the bottom of the cup. (There are no mugs in Aunt Julia's house.) Clearly, he had something to say.

'She has your best interests at heart, you know,' he began, finally laying the spoon down in the saucer.

In the quiet kitchen I could hear the pipes ticking as the heating system shut down for the night and the house bedded itself down.

I nodded.

‘You must see that this has come as a tremendous shock to us. Especially since it’s that man ...’

‘Good old Russell Checkland. Causing trouble in the Kingdom household since he could walk.’

I nodded.

‘I want to ask you, quietly and away from – any upsetting moments – I have to ask – Jenny, is he putting any sort of pressure on you to marry him? You can tell me.’

I shook my head.

He looked down again. ‘Are you – pregnant?’

Another head shake.

‘Are you doing this of your own free will?’

I nodded.

‘It’s just – I know you live quietly. Indeed, it’s necessary for you to do so. But this is so drastic. If you wanted to go away, I’m sure a little trip could be arranged. A change of scenery, perhaps, would do you good. Would you like that?’

‘Wow!’ said Thomas. *‘They really don’t want you marrying their daughter’s lover, do they? What do you want to do?’*

And suddenly, it was all very clear, like a path laid out in front of me and lights to show the way. Doubts fell away, leaving me suddenly calm and peaceful.

‘I want to marry Russell Checkland,’ I said to both of them.

‘Well. I see. Yes. I see,’ said Uncle Richard, who clearly didn’t. ‘In that case ... Jenny, I want you to listen to me very carefully. This is important. I will speak to your aunt. She won’t be happy for a few days, and if you want to spend time with your fiancé, coming and going quietly from the house then I think that would be a very good idea. In the interests of peace and harmony you might want to discourage him from too frequent visits here. He does seem to have the knack of annoying your aunt.’

I nodded.

‘But, and this is the important thing, Jenny. I – we both – want you to know that should you – not be happy – for any reason at all – you still have a home here. I urge you never to forget that. Normally, of course, I would never advocate interfering in the affairs of husband and wife and please don’t think I’m doing so now, but I’ve grown very fond of you over the years and I just want you to be happy. So if, one day, you find that you are not, you will always be welcome back here, with us to take care of you.’

I swallowed a huge lump in my throat and nodded. At that moment I was conscious of all the things I’d missed. Maybe I should have done this years ago, had little chats in the kitchen with dear Uncle Richard, just for a few minutes before we went to bed. How comforting that would have been.

Too late now.

I got up before I burst into tears, smiled at him, and took myself off to bed.

The next morning, I met Russell at the bottom of the road.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I’ve been warned off. Presumably, this is so she won’t come at me like Norman Bates’s mother.’

‘Who’s Norman Bates?’

He sighed. ‘Remind me to rent you the movie.’ He looked at me. ‘Or not.’

‘Is he still there?’

‘Kevin? Yes. He was just stirring when I left. Mrs C is preparing his own body weight in bacon. You’re going to have to marry me soon or he’s literally going to eat me out of house and home.’ He gave me a quick look ‘Everything all right last night?’

‘Oh yes, although Uncle Richard thinks it might be best if you stay away for a while.’

‘Yes, he’s not an idiot, is he? So, Kevin.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve been thinking.’

‘Is he going to marry him, too?’

‘I’m going to ask him to stay a while. As if he’s doing me a favour. I’m sure he’ll say yes. He doesn’t want to go back on the streets. Some do, they can’t settle, but not this lad. He can help me around the place, doing odd jobs and such. I can’t pay him – yet – but he can have board and lodging. Will you help fix up his room? There’s plenty of old furniture around the place. He can have a bed, table, an armchair, chest of drawers, you choose. I think I might even have an old TV around somewhere. What do you think? It’s a face-saver for him and it’s a good deal for me.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I hope he stays.’

‘I think he will.’

‘And you’ll be able to pay him – later, I mean.’

He skidded off the road into a layby. Intentionally, I hoped.

‘Yes. I want to talk to you about that. I’ve been thinking about this money business. My solicitors will have some stuff for you to sign about the house which we’ll send on to your uncle as a sign of good faith. I’ll admit I was winding him up the other day, but I can see how this must look to him, so I’ve had an idea. I know your uncle thinks I want the money for drink, gambling, dancing-girls, whatever ...’

Or to support Francesca when you manage to lure her away from Daniel Palmer, I thought.

‘... so I thought of a compromise to show my good faith and to keep you out of the line of fire. He continues your normal monthly allowance, or whatever you have and I pay for everything on my credit card and send him the bills to settle on our behalf. That way he can reassure himself that the bulk of the expenditure is on our house and supporting you and he can see I’m not running up bills for anything else. When it’s all done and we’re still together – and we will be – then we’ll sort out something more permanent. What do you

think?’

‘*Hmm,*’ said Thomas, behind me.

‘What?’

‘*No, actually, now I come to think of it, it’s quite a good scheme. I can’t see your uncle objecting at all. And presumably, all your money’s invested so he’ll need to draw up lists of what’s where for Russell and that will take time, so yes, in the short-term, this might work.*’

‘So,’ I said to Russell, ‘you’ll put this idea to my uncle?’

‘Good God, no,’ he said, starting the engine and roaring out of the layby.

‘My solicitor will present the suggestion. I shall object most strongly.’

He grinned at me like a naughty boy. ‘I’m not just a pretty face, you know.’

Kevin was just finishing breakfast when we arrived.

He got to his feet as I walked in, clumsily bumping against his chair and nearly knocking over his mug of tea. His bruises had reached the yellow and green stage, except for the one across the bridge of his nose and under one eye which was still a vivid red and purple.

It seemed to me that just for once it was up to me to put someone else at their ease, so I said good morning and asked him if he had slept well.

He nodded and swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple moving up and down his throat. He said, nearly as jerkily as me, ‘I’m sorry about last night. Really sorry.’

Russell said, ‘Will you ever do it again?’

‘Oh, no, no. I didn’t want to do it once. I sat for hours behind that wheelie bin, working up the nerve.’

‘And waiting for someone to walk past.’

‘Yeah, it wasn’t a good spot. You were the only people to walk down that alley all night.’

‘Fancy that,’ I said to Thomas.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘*Miles away. What?*’

While Kevin and Russell heaved the furniture up the stable stairs, Mrs Crisp and I made up the bed, hung some curtains, put down a few rugs, and found a lampshade and a few cushions. Russell plugged in a space heater, with dire warnings about going off and leaving it on. I remembered him asking Kevin if he smoked. He had a real fear of fire. ‘Nothing goes up like stables,’ he said. ‘And if you can’t get the horses out it’s just ... So watch it, Kevin.’

He nodded solemnly. ‘I will. I promise.’

In the end, it looked quite nice. He carefully placed his book in the exact centre of his bedside table and put his two freshly washed T-shirts in one drawer and his three socks in another. He hung his towels on the back of the door and laid his comb under the small mirror.

I noticed he had still been unable to throw away his flat cardboard box and had carefully stored it under the bed. I could have cried for him.

And then we all had some lunch.

‘Eat up,’ said Russell, ‘We have a busy afternoon ahead of us.

A busy afternoon which, for me, soon became just a formless blur of faces and places. The people in the Register Office were very kind, which was just as well, because after I’d handed over my documents and tried to look radiant, it all rapidly became too much. I kept telling myself to enjoy this once in a lifetime experience but this sudden escalation, from nothing to everything all at once, was difficult and left me longing for peace and quiet. To give him his due, Russell tried to do most of the talking for me. Some questions, however, I had to answer for myself and they were kindness itself while I struggled to get out the answers.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Russell, as the superintendent registrar nipped out to take an urgent telephone call.

‘Aunt Julia. Somehow. Will stop things. Might be her now.’

‘She won’t. She can’t. This will be fine. Just smile and say yes. In fact, Jenny, that’s my recipe for a happily married lifetime together. Whatever I say, your job is to smile and say yes.’

I tried to smile back, but it was a sad affair. I began to worry he would find me such high maintenance he would change his mind.

‘*He won’t,*’ said Thomas.

‘Yes, I know,’ I said to him. ‘I’m his ticket to a better future.’

‘*And he is yours. Don’t let all this crap from your aunt blind you to that. He said it himself. You’re going into this as equal partners. Just remember that.*’

The superintendent registrar came back into the room. And apparently the message was nothing to do with us because she carried on from where she’d left off. I reached out and took hold of Russell’s jacket, very gently so he wouldn’t notice. But he did and covered my cold hand with his warm one.

‘This will take a bit of time,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘Words don’t always come easily.’

‘Not the slightest problem,’ she said, smiling at me. ‘We have as long as you need,’ and I felt a little better.

He did all the talking at the jewellers. Thomas and I wandered off while they discreetly ascertained how much was going to be spent, only returning to look at the trays brought out for my inspection. I stared at them helplessly and then at the assistant, who presumably had panic-stricken females in his shop on a regular basis.

‘Well, let’s see,’ he said slowly, ignoring Russell who was moving restlessly. ‘You have small hands, so nothing big or clunky. ‘Do you like claw fittings?’

I shook my head.

‘How about this one then, or this one, or possibly this one?’ and he laid three sparkling rings on a cloth in front of me.

Three was a much easier number to deal with. I tried them all on and settled for the last one, a plain band with five diamonds inset.

‘Understated, but quietly elegant,’ said Thomas. *‘Just like you,’* and I leaned towards him in gratitude.

But the next day was the dress-buying day to which I had once so looked forward, and now filled me with dread. Tanya met us in town, took one look at my face, punched Russell on the arm and said something short in German, which actually I understood very well.

‘Ow,’ he said, rubbing his arm. ‘Whatever was that for?’

She ignored him. ‘Jenny, we will go to a very good shop first, which is owned by my friend. I have told her of you and she has two or three garments for you to see. Russell, you will go away now. I will telephone you when you are to collect us. Goodbye.’

Muttering, he took himself away without saying goodbye.

The shop was lovely and situated down one of the narrow side streets near the medieval bridge. It was quiet, carpeted, and smelled expensive. The actual sales area was small because of all the exciting things happening in the back.

There were four dresses awaiting our arrival and, just for once, I chose immediately.

‘This one,’ I said, pointing.

‘Excellent,’ said Tanya. ‘That was my choice too. You will try it on at once.’

And it wasn’t a case of struggling in the communal changing room. There was a very kind lady to assist me out of my own clothes, as if I hadn’t been doing that myself for years, and into this beautiful, beautiful creation.

It was a dress coat with a high fur collar, fur cuffs, a discreet fastening down the front, and a full skirt.

‘No train,’ said Tanya’s friend, ‘so you don’t have to worry about the wet. A good quality satin which will hang well and keep its shape. That creamy pink is perfect for your colouring. White is not anywhere near as forgiving as girls like to think.’

‘This is perfect,’ said Tanya. ‘The traditional dress and veil is not for you, Jenny. You are different and you should dress to reflect that.’

It was the first time I had ever thought being different could be a good thing.

‘Can I see it in daylight?’ I asked, remembering Thomas, who would not come in.

I walked slowly out into the front of the shop where Thomas stood peering at a very adventurous hat on a stand.

He said nothing for a very long time. I began to worry. Should I have gone for something more traditional? Was he searching for tactful words?

‘Jenny, you look like a winter angel. Don’t let anyone ever tell you you’re not beautiful.’

I touched his nose gently, in gratitude.

Tanya sorted out the few small alterations to be made, ordered a pair of plain cream shoes and a pair of gloves to wear with it, organised the delivery

date and address, and we were done.

‘Well,’ she said as we stood outside. ‘You are a most efficient person, Jenny. I hope you will have a good effect on Russell. I have said nothing, but I know Andrew is very pleased you are to marry Russell. He considers you to be a beneficial influence.’

‘Imagine that.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said.

She looked straight at me. ‘He is a little boy still crying for his mother. And you are stronger than you think. I will say no more. Now, we will have coffee.’

So we went to The Copper Kettle, where waitresses fell from the trees in their eagerness to serve us. Sharon wasn’t there.

We had coffee and cake and the rest of the day ahead of us. We went to Tanya’s beauty salon – another first for me – and I had a manicure, a pedicure, my hair cut and coloured, and a facial. It was all very quiet and intimate. I took a chance. While we were alone and steaming gently, I asked her straight out.

‘How did his mother die?’

‘If you believe Russell’s father, it was because of Russell’s wild ways. If you believe Russell, it was because his father was a cold-hearted bastard who drove her to it. If you believe the coroner, it was a road-traffic accident. Her car came off the road on the bend by the Whittington turn-off. She took it too fast. She was a reckless driver.’

I pondered this for a while.

‘Does he think his father actually killed her or just drove her to it?’

‘I do not know. I know only that each believed the other responsible for what was, in the end, simply an accident.’

She said no more so neither did I.

We emerged some hours later, relaxed and refreshed. I had glossy hair, pretty hands, and a spring in my step. Tanya caught me looking at myself in shop windows and laughed at me. We went to a wine bar, where she rang Russell and gave him permission to join us. And he could bring Andrew if he wanted.

At home that night, Thomas and I talked about things. I had not thought that anyone could regard my marriage to Russell Checkland as a good thing for him. ‘Other than the money, of course. Although apparently, I’m getting half the house.’

‘Yes,’ he said thoughtfully, and stared out of the window for a while.

‘And both Andrew and Tanya think I’m a good influence.’

‘Yes, but they don’t know you very well yet.’

I played with the sheet. ‘Do you think ... do you think this marriage might actually be a good thing?’

‘I’m certain of it.’

‘But why? How?’

‘I told you Jenny, years ago. You’re special.’

Chapter Five

We were married as quickly and quietly as possible. Aunt Julia made no further objections. She was torn, I think, between wanting to hush things up and not wanting to be seen to hush things up, in case people thought there *was* something to hush up.

The day before the wedding was cold but sunny. Russell put a halter on Boxer and made me walk with him up the lane on to the moors.

‘It’ll do you good,’ he said. ‘You need some colour in your cheeks and it’s not going to do my reputation any good at all if you turn up tomorrow looking like an early Christian martyr. And I certainly don’t want your aunt leaping to her feet and stopping the ceremony because you’re in too much of a state to say, “I do”. So get your coat, grab a pair of wellies, and let’s be off.’

It was a good idea. Once I was out in the fresh air, I felt much better. We strode along with Boxer jumping and shying at monsters hiding in the hedge, sinister puddles, and strangely shaped rocks.

‘Why does he do that?’ I said, as Russell coaxed him past a hostile telephone pole.

‘Well, like Andrew said, he’s a bit of a big girl’s blouse. He’s an ex-racehorse. He led a pampered and luxurious existence until they discovered that although he could go like the wind, it was generally in the wrong direction. He hates horseboxes, crowds, other horses, noise, the rain – you name it. He belonged to a friend of mine and both he and I lost rather a lot of money on him. Sadly, failed racehorses get a pretty raw deal, sometimes. He’s gelded so he couldn’t be bred from and he’s such a basket case no one would want to anyway. He certainly couldn’t hunt. He might have been sold privately – he’s a good-looking horse, but he’d most likely have ended in a horsebox somewhere, travelling for sixteen hours without food or water, dragged out at the other end, and turned into dog-food. Or sausages. Or whatever. So I bought him. Usually I ride him up here, but since there’s three of us and it’s a nice day I thought we could walk together. It’s all been a bit hectic recently, don’t you think?’

I nodded. Thomas walked beside me, peering over hedges and generally enjoying himself. I stroked Boxer’s shoulder, hoping Thomas wouldn’t think I was being unfaithful.

‘I’d like to ride,’ I said, quietly. I thought no one heard.

We passed another farm.

‘That’s the Braithwaites’ place,’ said Russell, waving to a man crossing the yard with two dogs and a bucket. ‘He rents land off me for his sheep.’

‘Fifty pence each,’ I said. He looked surprised. ‘I pay attention.’

He laughed and then it took us five minutes to persuade Boxer through the gate at the top of the lane. Thomas and I skipped through, out onto the open

moor, and waited patiently.

‘Aren’t you going to ... let him off the lead?’

‘No. He has the sense of direction of a tea-bag; I’ll be looking for him all night and he’ll probably end up in Tesco on the Rushford by-pass.’

We followed the path along a pretty stream that bubbled over rocks and gravel beds on its way down off the moor and through Russell’s fields to join the River Rush. There were no trees this high up and the wind was fresh and clear.

‘A good tip,’ said Russell. ‘If you ever get lost on the moor, just find water – there’s plenty up here – and follow it down.’

‘OK,’ I said, and thought no more about it.

I sat that night in my empty bedroom. I’d lived here since I was eighteen and now everything had been packed up and sent off to Frogmorton. My room looked empty and unfamiliar. I wondered what would become of it. My dress hung in the wardrobe; shoes and gloves were on the shelf. Aunt Julia’s hairdresser was coming at half past nine the next morning.

‘*How are you feeling?*’ said Thomas.

‘A bit strange.’

‘*Are you afraid?*’

‘No. No, he doesn’t frighten me at all. Should I be?’

‘*No, I don’t think so. I think Tanya hit the nail on the head when she said he was just a little boy who hasn’t grown up yet. Well, that’s going to change.*

‘How so?’

‘*He has responsibilities now. It’ll be interesting to see how he handles them.*’

‘And Francesca. How will he handle her?’

‘*I thought you discussed this.*’

‘We did. He made it very clear. He was completely honest about it. I thought it seemed a small price to pay for getting a life.’

‘*Are you having second thoughts?*’

‘No, it’s just pre-wedding nerves. I know what marrying Russell Checkland entails,’ I said. Wrongly, as it turned out. ‘He promised to be discreet. He promised he’d never hurt me and I believe him.’

‘*So no regrets, then?*’

‘No.’

‘*So no reason not to get a good night’s sleep?*’

‘No.’

‘*Do you remember,*’ said Thomas, ‘*when we first saw this room? How excited we were?*’

‘I do. That seems a very long time ago now.’

‘*It was a long time ago. Since we met, you’ve taken your exams; got a degree, and now you’re going to be married. You’re all grown-up now, Jenny.*

A horrible, cold hand closed around my heart. 'Thomas, are you leaving me?'

'No, no. I told you. I'm here for as long as you need me and you're going to need me for a while longer.'

'I'll always need you,' I said.

'No,' he said sadly. *'No, you won't.'*

Don't ever get married.

Seriously.

Don't ever get married.

Forget the Archbishop of Canterbury deploring the decline of traditional marriage. Forget whichever politicians are currently lauding family values in an effort to distract attention from their own upcoming, exclusive tabloid exposé. Forget any of the rose-tinted idiots banging on about your wedding being the happiest day of your life. Weddings are a long, rain-drenched nightmare when the only sounds are your relatives venomously hissing in dark corners. I don't know how anyone who doesn't have a giant, golden horse gets through them.

It started with my hair. Never before a cause of disagreement, it was propelled into the front line because, given the simple nature of my dress, I wanted a simple French pleat.

Aunt Julia wanted virginal ringlets.

I coped by simply shaking my head every time she spoke, thus signifying disagreement and rendering it impossible for the poor hairdresser to get stuck in. Eventually, she got the message, and possibly lost a long-standing customer, but she didn't look too unhappy and I got my way.

Not like Aunt Julia.

I felt quite sorry for her because she obviously didn't want to dignify the occasion by looking as if she'd made any special effort, but she was constitutionally incapable of appearing in public looking anything other than her best. She compromised with a pearl-grey silk suit that only whispered 'funereal occasion', rather than what I'm sure was her first choice – deep, heavy black, closely veiled, and clutching a handkerchief to the corner of one eye.

We met at the bottom of the stairs where Uncle Richard was anxiously consulting his watch at five-second intervals. She looked at me for a while and then started down her list.

'It's not white. What will people think?'

'No one is attending apart from family members,' soothed Uncle Richard, unsuccessfully trying to get her to the door. 'No one will see. Now, come along, we mustn't be late. Well, not more than fashionably late,' he ended with a weak laugh.

'Where is your veil? You must have a veil. No flowers, either. Jenny, I've held my peace, but I have to say ...'

'Tune her out,' said Thomas. 'It's not important.'

I tried. I also tried not to dwell on the fact no one had said how nice I looked. And I did. I really did. In addition, I was the bride, so even if I didn't, they should have lied. I was a little hurt.

'I think your dress is beautiful and so are you.'

'Thank you, but you're prejudiced.'

'Not today. You look elegant and sophisticated, Jenny. A real class act. Russell Checkland is going to be blown away. Good for you.'

Feeling slightly more cheerful, I climbed into the car. Fortunately, it was only a few minutes away.

The next thing was the weather. It was raining slightly when we left, and the sky had that rather ominous grey-yellow look. Just as we pulled up, the heavens opened.

Uncle Richard did what he could with an enormous golf umbrella and I was pretty well protected, Aunt Julia less so, so her already bad mood worsened considerably, and by the time we actually got inside, she was smouldering nicely.

We were shown into a very pleasant room where Andrew and Tanya were already waiting with Mrs Crisp and Kevin. I was so pleased to see them. Kevin was wearing what was obviously one of Russell's jackets. It was far too large and he peered out from between the shoulders, rather like a tortoise.

Aunt Julia threw one scathing look at the people who not only had the temerity to be related to the man who was marrying her niece, but brought his staff to the wedding as well, and withdrew to the little cloakroom to repair some damage.

The atmosphere lightened a little.

Russell wasn't there. I noticed Andrew quietly fishing out his phone, hitting redial, and then stuffing it back in his jacket pocket. In so much as he ever could, he looked angry.

I felt a cold hand on me. Had he changed his mind? After everything, had he bottled out? Was I going to be left at the altar? I stared at Andrew who shrugged. Tanya smiled slightly, but she looked very tense. They'd lost him.

Daniel Palmer wasn't there, either, and he'd promised. Was it at all possible that Russell had finally persuaded Francesca to leave him? And she, unable to accept his marriage to someone else, had gone with him? Had that been his plan all along? It seemed a very, very likely scenario.

We all waited in silence. Even Thomas seemed to have nothing to say.

The doors opened again and Daniel Palmer walked in, shaking his umbrella. Alone. He looked up and scanned the room. Not finding Francesca present, his mouth set in a thin, hard line that vanished as he saw me.

'Hello, Jenny. You look very pretty. I'm sorry Francesca's not here yet. We were supposed to meet here, but you know what she's like. I'm sure one day she'll be late for her own funeral.'

It was a good effort and Andrew rose nobly to assist.

‘Don’t feel too badly, Daniel, we’re missing the bridegroom too, so we’re nowhere near kick-off yet.’

You could see him regretting the words as soon as they were out of his mouth.

‘Good grief. This foot in mouth thing is obviously genetic. It’s probably best if the two of you don’t have kids.’

At that moment, however, the doors crashed open and Francesca chose to make her entrance. Jaws dropped. She posed in the doorway, giving us all the benefit of her flawless profile. She was furious. All the old childhood signs were there – the flashing eyes and flushed cheeks. She jerked her gloves between her hands. Something – or someone – had upset her.

Ignoring the convention that said you don’t wear white or black to a wedding, she’d done both. She wore a figure-hugging white gown with black accessories. A tiny veiled hat nestled amongst her curls. Either accidentally – or not – she looked far more bride-like than the actual bride herself.

There was rather a nasty pause. Daniel said, ‘Francesca?’

She snapped, ‘What?’

Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, Aunt Julia walked back into the room. Any benefits she may have gained from a quiet ten minutes in the cloakroom were completely dispelled by the sight of Bad-Tempered Bridezilla glaring at her fiancé.

She drew breath, but before she had time to utter, the doors opened again and Russell Checkland was among us.

He was very, very, drunk. Swaying slightly, he fixed his eyes on Francesca and said, ‘I didn’t mean ...’ and immediately everyone in the room realised that although they may have made separate entrances, they’d been together. And it hadn’t ended well.

‘Jesus,’ muttered Andrew under his breath. Tanya nudged him, none too gently, but the real star was Daniel Palmer, who, ignoring the fuming Francesca, moved forward and gently took my arm.

‘If you’re ready, Jenny, shall we go in?’ True, he had his own agenda, wanting Russell Checkland married off as quickly as possible, but I appreciated it, none the less.

Russell pulled himself together, enunciating very carefully. ‘Thank you, Daniel, but I’ve got it.’

Daniel ignored him and we entered the marriage room together, followed by Russell and Francesca and the rest of the guests.

We dealt with the very natural confusion arising from the bride and groom having entered separately and with other partners, and the ceremony passed off without anyone disgracing themselves too much.

Thomas stood beside me the whole time, breathing calm reassurance, helping me with the words and towards the end, asking to be congratulated on not having eaten their floral decorations.

Russell hadn’t lost the ring and managed to get it on the right finger. He

remembered my name. I suppose it was the best I could hope for.

Aunt Julia remained rigidly silent and disapproving throughout.

Francesca sighed loudly as I struggled.

Christopher didn't come. It was the only decent thing he ever did in his entire life.

It was still raining when we left for The Red Lion, where Uncle Richard had hired a private room for a late lunch. Russell and I were booked into the honeymoon suite. The hotel staff were very sweet. We were shown into our private room and given champagne and flowers as if we were a normal couple.

Andrew whisked Russell away. I suspected he was about to renew his acquaintance with Mr Splash of Cold Water. I supposed, somewhat drearily, I'd better get used to this. Andrew stuck his head around the door, whispered briefly to Tanya and disappeared again. She stepped magnificently into the breach.

'Poor Russell has eaten something disagreeable. He asks we start without him. You will sit down.'

We sat. I was isolated by the empty space on one side of me and Aunt Julia on the other. Francesca was opposite, very pointedly not eating anything. She turned an angry shoulder on Daniel and ignored everyone.

Kevin hadn't got used to unlimited food yet and ate everything in his path.

Mrs Crisp surveyed the table with a professional eye, drank her own champagne, and started on Kevin's.

Tanya ventured one or two remarks but no one responded so she gave it up.

We ate in silence. There were no toasts. There were no speeches. There was no cake. There was no groom. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife.

Finally, Francesca spoke. 'Wasn't it funny when the registrar mistook me for the bride?'

Aunt Julia's hand twitched. I suspect she was fighting an urge to slap her.

'I cannot see how she could make such a mistake,' said Tanya, calmly. 'You are far too old to be the bride.'

Even Francesca was floored by such breathtaking rudeness. She gaped for a moment and then got to her feet, slightly less gracefully than usual.

'Yes,' said Daniel, hurling himself into another breach. 'I think it's about time we made a move. Jenny, congratulations again and thank you for a lovely lunch.'

The bottom was falling out of my world, but I dragged up good manners and pride. Fortunately, no one ever expected much from me, so I simply said, 'Thank you,' and shook hands. They left, still not looking at each other.

Aunt Julia collected her bag. 'Yes, we must go before it gets dark, Richard.'

It was half past four in the afternoon.

I got a brief hug from her and a slightly longer one from Uncle Richard.

‘Remember what I said,’ he whispered. ‘Just one telephone call.’

A troubled-looking Mrs Crisp took Kevin away. I smiled politely and said, ‘Thank you,’ to everyone as they left, concealing, I hoped, how desperately I wanted to be alone.

Finally, just Tanya remained. I looked at her. She sighed heavily and fished around under the table for her shoes. Andrew reappeared at last. She stood up, her eyebrows raised in silent query.

Andrew looked very tired and very fed-up. He said, ‘Jenny, I’m sorry. He’s gone. Just to walk it off, I think. He’ll be back soon.’

Oh, my God. He was late for his own wedding, drunk at the ceremony, didn’t actually attend the reception, and then walked out. I stood in rigid humiliation.

‘Jenny,’ he said uncertainly, but I just wanted to be on my own.

I made a huge effort, dragging the words from the pit of my stomach. ‘Andrew, I’m ... sorry you were ... stuck with this. ... Tanya ... thank you for your ... support ... today. I think I’ll ... go to my room.’

They nodded slightly, torn between relief and embarrassment.

I left the room and silently made my way to the stairs. If the hotel staff were surprised I was making my way to the honeymoon suite alone, they were too polite to say anything.

I wearily climbed the stairs, an unusually quiet Thomas beside me. Maybe Russell had already gone to the room.

No, it was empty. My case stood at the bottom of the bed. I sat heavily and closed my eyes.

Thomas said uncertainly, ‘*Jenny, it was just a little Dutch courage and he overdid it. He’ll be walking it off somewhere, you’ll see.*’

‘No. Today was the day he realised he’d lost her for ever. Even if he ever persuades her not to marry Daniel, he’s no longer free himself. I think now he’s no longer available, she’s realised what she’s lost as well. It’s just an awful mess and today I’ve done the most stupid thing in the world. I thought I could have a normal life just like other people. What was I thinking?’

Thomas made no answer, but my question was rhetorical anyway. I took refuge in practicality. I unpacked what I needed, undressed, and packed up my lovely dress that no one had noticed. If this was the happiest day of my life then I wasn’t looking forward to the rest of it.

I had a long, hot bath. I was in there for nearly an hour, but still no sign of Russell. My husband. I wondered if it was worth getting used to those words.

‘*Come on,*’ said Thomas. ‘*Let’s have some tea and watch Doctor Who. You’ll like that.*’

For him, I made an effort. I didn’t fancy tea, but they had hot chocolate, so I made myself a drink and curled up on the bed. Thomas stood comfortably close and we watched *Doctor Who*.

Afterwards, I switched off the TV, found my book, and climbed into bed. Thomas looked out of the window, occasionally describing what was going on

outside. We'd turned the lights down low, the room was peaceful and warm, and slowly, I began to feel a little better. Married or not, I was still in bed before 9.30 in the evening. The more things change ...

I made another hot chocolate and settled back on my pillows, immersed in my book. A scrabbling at the door made me jump. The card lock clicked and Russell Checkland walked in.

My heart sank. He hadn't gone to walk it off at all. He'd gone to top-up.

He stood at the foot of the bed, looking at me with no trace of friendliness. 'What? In bed already? You're keen, aren't you?'

He'd promised. He'd said – what had he said? I couldn't remember the exact words. Had I misunderstood? Or had he changed his mind?

Thomas shifted his weight, just very slightly, and the threat was implicit. I wasn't alone.

I remained perfectly still, looking at him over the rim of my cup, book open on my knees. Don't move. Don't say anything. What would he do next?

'Good,' said Thomas. *'Very sensible. I think we both need to stay calm. Failing that, hit him with the bedside lamp.'*

The moment seemed endless. Neither of us moved. Finally, he gave a short laugh and disappeared into the bathroom. I put down my cup with a trembling hand.

'It's OK,' said Thomas. *'If it's any reassurance, after what he's drunk today, I don't think he could even raise a smile, let alone anything else.'*

Indeed, there did seem to be a lot of banging and crashing in the bathroom. I heard the shower go on. There was a thud and a cry.

'Whoops,' said Thomas, unsympathetically.

'Yes,' I said, picking up my book.

'He might have knocked himself out.'

'I'll finish this chapter and if there's still no sound then I'll go and look.'

He was back long before the end of the chapter, wearing T-shirt and shorts, which was a bit of a relief.

'Our virtue is safe,' said Thomas. *'He's looking for spare blankets and pillows.'*

So he was, unsteadily building himself a nest on the sofa. He fell heavily and pulled a blanket over himself. Within seconds, he was snoring.

It was the first time I hadn't slept alone. I mean, the first time I'd slept with someone else in the same room.

'What about me?'

'Well, you don't snore like bathwater going down the plughole.'

We listened some more.

'It's very – loud.'

'He certainly sleeps with enthusiasm.'

I lay awake for most of the night, thinking. Stubborn pride came to my aid. I wasn't giving anyone the satisfaction of seeing me run back to Aunt Julia. If I gave up now, I would never, ever again have another opportunity to make a

life for myself. I could see myself, dwindling down the years, becoming ‘Mad old Jenny Dove in the attic’. I shivered. I was twenty-eight. I could reasonably expect to live for about another fifty years. Fifty years of nothing.

No, I had taken a small step towards independence. Tomorrow I would take another. And another the next day. I would get there. With or without Russell Checkland, I would do this.

I must have drifted off at some point because I woke at around seven thirty the next morning. For a panic-stricken moment, I wondered where I was and then jumped a mile as someone snorted, grunted, and turned over.

I sat up quickly and looked across the room. Russell Checkland – my husband – lay sprawled on his back, arms out-flung. He’d stopped snoring, thank God, but it still wasn’t a pretty sight. His mouth was slightly open and his hair, always unruly, lay in all directions. His pallor accentuated the dark shadows under his eyes. He looked sad and vulnerable. I hardened my heart.

The bathroom was full of his clothes. I kicked them aside. Not attempting to be quiet, I showered, cleaned my teeth, dressed, and brushed my hair. Returning to the bedroom, he hadn’t moved at all. I wondered whether I should wake him.

‘What for? He won’t thank you. I think it’s kinder to let him sleep. Should we roll him on his side in case he chokes on his own vomit?’

‘He’s not vomiting.’

‘He might.’

‘I’m sure he’s done this before. He can probably roll himself over without even waking up. He’ll be fine.’

I packed up my few things, again not attempting to keep the noise down, but there was no reaction. Maybe he really was unconscious. I went into the bathroom and filled a glass of water and left it and a strip of paracetamol where he could see them, snapped my case shut, picked up my coat, and headed to the door without a backwards glance.

Down in reception, I said carefully, ‘Is it ... possible to extend the ... booking for another twenty-four hours?’

‘One moment please, madam. Yes, that won’t be a problem.’

‘Thank you.’ There was no way he was going to make checkout at 11.00 a.m. And I was sticking him with the bill. ‘Can I have a ... taxi please?’

I climbed into the taxi and the driver said, ‘Where to, love?’

Where to indeed? My old home or my new home?

‘Well?’ said Thomas.

Was there every any doubt? I gave the Frogmorton address.

I remembered to direct him around the back because for all I knew the front door still didn’t open. Kevin appeared as I was paying him off.

‘Can I take your case – Mrs Checkland?’

Yes, it sounded strange to me too, but that’s who I was. Mrs Russell Checkland.

‘Thank you, Kevin.’

We went into the kitchen. Mrs Crisp bustled forward.

‘Welcome, Mrs Checkland. Welcome to your new home.’ She looked over my shoulder for the young master.

She spoke with such kindness that I felt sudden tears prick my eyes. She must have seen my embarrassment because she said, ‘I expect you’d like to spend the morning getting settled. Let me take you up.’

So we all trailed towards the stairs. The living room was full of boxes.

‘Your books, I think,’ she said, following my gaze. ‘I didn’t like to unpack them. Your clothes and personal effects are all in your room.’

The room was exactly as I remembered it. ‘I’ve put some curtains up,’ she said, ‘and found some pretty bedding, but I expect you’ll be replacing everything, sooner or later.’

Was there a bit of an off-note there?

She signed to Kevin to put my case on the bed. I thanked him. It wasn’t heavy. I could have managed. They left.

I walked to the window and looked out over the wet jungle that was Russell Checkland’s garden. I stood for a long time before Thomas wandered over.

‘Aren’t you going to unpack?’

I sighed. ‘I don’t feel like it.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It – just doesn’t feel like home.’

‘No, it’s better, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know.’ I walked away and sat on the bed.

‘Jenny,’ his voice was stern. ‘*I have not helped you through the emotional maelstrom of the last month to have you sit alone and friendless in yet another bedroom. Get changed, we’re going for a walk.*’

‘It’s raining.’

‘No, it’s not. Now put on something that won’t mind getting muddy and off we go.’

So we did.

Mrs Crisp asked if we were going up on to the moors. I said tersely that I didn’t know. She looked embarrassed.

‘We always ask, Mrs Checkland. The weather up there is very changeable, especially at this time of year. If you don’t come back then we know where to look.’

‘Oh. Sorry. Yes I am, but not very far. I’ll ... stick to the path.’

She nodded and we set off.

We walked up the lane past the Braithwaites’ place. He was just emerging from the barn and waved. I waved back, slightly cheered by this small sign of friendliness.

As always, the air up here was crisp and clear. I felt it blow away more than my bad mood. The ground was wet underfoot, but the sun was struggling to come out. Perhaps it was an omen.

We walked for about an hour. Thomas was very quiet and I was lost in my

own thoughts.

'What are you worrying about? Whether he will be at Frogmorton when we get back, or whether he won't?'

'I don't know,' I said, honestly.

'Try not to worry too much. It's been a pretty rough forty-eight hours. A good night's sleep and some time to reflect and maybe things will get back on track.'

Are you talking about him or me?

'Actually, I'm not sure.'

He wasn't there when we got back. Mrs Crisp, looking even more worried than ever, asked me if he would be back for dinner. I said, truthfully, that I didn't know.

I sat in my room and wondered if I should telephone Andrew, but decided against it. If he was there then they would have called.

'Maybe he's finally run off with Francesca,' I said.

'Will you get over this obsession with Francesca? The chances are that he's woken up, felt like death, and gone back to sleep again. If he has left the hotel, he's probably taken himself off somewhere quiet where he can calm down and start feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself.'

I nodded. He was probably right.

'Now, start unpacking and putting down roots.'

So I did. Mrs Crisp brought me some tea. I unpacked and hung my clothes, sliding my wedding dress carefully to one side of the wardrobe. I laid my bits and pieces on the dressing table and my toiletries in the bathroom. Thomas was right. He usually was, although there was no need to tell him that. I did feel better. Tomorrow, I would unpack my books and laptop.

I had dinner in solitary state in the little morning room, having refused point-blank to use the awful dining room. The living room seemed cold and bleak and was full of my boxes, so when I'd finished eating, I went to bed.

Mrs Crisp said goodnight gravely and watched me go. I managed to get into my room before the tears started to fall. I curled on the bed and sobbed. Thomas gave me a few minutes before dropping his head and nuzzling my hair. The room filled with the smell of ginger biscuits.

I gulped a bit and pulled myself together.

'So,' said Thomas. 'Was this day as bad as yesterday?'

'Not quite.'

'Well, there you go then. Progress.'

'Thomas, where is he? What could he be doing?'

'I don't know, but he'll be back soon. He has to be. He lives here.'

'He was drunk at the wedding. He didn't attend the reception, such as it was. Now he's gone missing. Do you think we should call the police?'

'No,' said Thomas, firmly.

'Well, if he hasn't gone off with Francesca then the only reason he's not here is because he doesn't want to be with me.'

‘Yes, I think you might be right.’

‘What?’

‘No, I didn’t mean that. I think he’s too ashamed to show his face. Let’s face it, he frightened you last night, he wakes up this morning and you’re gone. He’s the one who should be panicking, not you. He’ll turn up tomorrow, you just wait and see.’

Somewhat comforted, I went to bed.

He didn’t turn up tomorrow. I went downstairs for breakfast and now Mrs Crisp looked really anxious. ‘He’s not a bad lad,’ she said. ‘But he does take things to heart sometimes. Always has.’

My thoughts went back to Francesca again, wondering what sort of body blow she had dealt him this time and whether she had done it out of spite, or, more likely, was just too stupid and self-absorbed to realise the damage she had done.

Mrs Crisp disappeared and I slowly finished my breakfast and wondered what to do next.

‘Boxes,’ said Thomas, who appeared to have some sort of box fixation. ‘Get your books arranged and you’ll feel better.’

So I did, taking my time and arranging them on the half-empty shelves in the living room. Even so, I was finished by lunchtime. I unpacked my laptop and set it to charge.

I looked around the big, cold house and wondered what had happened to the bright, warm world I’d known here only a couple of weeks ago. I went up to my room again.

‘Jenny, you must stop this,’ said Thomas. ‘You moved the world to get away from your aunt and all you’re doing is sitting alone in yet another bedroom. This is your house. You can go wherever you like. Do whatever you like.’

‘Thomas, I don’t know what to do. I never thought I would be here alone like this. I just don’t know what my role here is. Aunt Julia never lifts a finger except to arrange a flower or two. Mrs Finch does pretty well everything, but I’m not sure that’s for me. But not only do I not know what to do, I don’t know how to do it, either. I could probably plug in a vacuum cleaner, or dust something, but I don’t know how to run a house. What would Mrs Crisp say? What does she want me to do? Being Jenny Checkland is very different from being Jenny Dove.’

‘Well, tell her.’

‘What?’

‘She’s not a monster, Jenny. She’s nice old Mrs Crisp who looked after Russell when his mother died and is probably worried to death, not only about where he is at the moment, but also whether she’s still going to have a job here under the new regime.’

I hadn’t thought of that. That someone could be even more apprehensive about the future than me. Feeling a little braver, I went downstairs. Lunch was

on my own again. I ate slowly and then took my dishes back to the kitchen.

‘Oh, Mrs Checkland, I would have done that.’

‘It’s all right, Mrs Crisp. Can we have some tea, please? I’d like to talk with you.’

She bustled about while I clenched my hands and tried to marshal words in some sort of order. When everything was ready and I couldn’t put it off any longer, I began.

‘I ... need your help, Mrs Crisp. I don’t ... know what to do. Russell isn’t here to ... tell me. I don’t know where he is. I’ve ... never run a house. What do I do? ... Do I offer to help? It’s a ... big house. I should be ... doing things. But I ... don’t ... know what.’

All that took a very long time. At the end, I sipped my tea and didn’t look at her.

She folded and re-folded a tea towel. ‘I’m so pleased to have this opportunity to talk to you, Mrs Checkland. And we certainly don’t need Russell to sort this out. Not that he’d be the slightest use anyway. I don’t know where he is, either, but don’t you worry yourself, my dear. He’s probably not daring to come back because he knows he’s not too big to get a clout round the ear when he does. Properly speaking, of course, that’s your job now. If you need something to stand on, just let me know.’

She looked so fierce, I couldn’t help laughing. I just hoped she’d never come after me with a tea towel!

‘But thank you for your offer, Mrs Checkland. It’s gratefully accepted. I’ve been thinking about this. When the other Mrs Checkland, Russell’s mother, was here, we would get together on Mondays and talk over menus and things and what we needed for the coming week. Then on Fridays, I would present her with the bills and we’d do the accounts. Would you like to start with that?’

I could do that. I nodded. This was much easier than I had thought it would be. Across the kitchen, Thomas was nodding encouragement and approval.

‘About the housework,’ she shifted in her chair. I thought this had been too easy. Was some ghastly domestic problem about to present itself and I had to sort it out? I remembered Aunt Julia once saying that any sentence that started with the words, ‘I wonder if I might have a word with you, madam ...’ was the lead-in to domestic meltdown. I braced myself.

‘The thing is,’ she said slowly and then straightened her back and carried on more firmly, ‘the thing is, when the other Mrs Checkland was here, there was me, of course, and two women from the village came up to help. Just part-timers, a couple of days a week. When it was just Russell and me, it didn’t matter so much, but now he’s opened up the house again, there’s all these rooms to clean, and Kevin’s here so there’s extra laundry and extra meals, especially if everyone doesn’t eat together, and I’m sorry, Mrs Checkland, but I’m not as young as I used to be and ...’ She stopped. I wasn’t the only one who feared for the future.

I patted her hand. Aunt Julia would have thrown a fit – but tastefully, of

course.

‘It’s OK, Mrs Crisp. We’ll – I’ll see what I can do.’ I didn’t have a clue, but hopefully, I’d think of something.

If anything, her embarrassment increased. ‘To tell the truth, I’ve already got someone in mind, only I haven’t liked to mention it because, well, she’s a relative and it didn’t seem proper somehow.’

Tired from all that talking, I just raised an eyebrow, but she understood.

‘Actually, I think you might already know her. It’s Sharon Ellis. She used to be a waitress at The Copper Kettle. She’s my niece.’

My mind flew back. ‘Has she left?’

‘They weren’t very kind to her. And she’s a good girl and a very hard worker. You wouldn’t regret it, Mrs Checkland. She bakes like a dream. She wants her own cake shop one day. That’s why she can only do part-time. She goes to college two days a week.’

‘She sounds ideal.’

She nodded. ‘Thank you, Mrs Checkland. I’ll give her a ring. She’ll be thrilled.’

My first decision as Mrs Checkland. I felt quite proud of myself. And if Russell didn’t like it then he should have bloody well been here to say no.

‘Fine. In the ... meantime, shall I lend a hand until she starts?’

‘That would be appreciated, thank you.’

‘I’ve finished my books, so I’ll get rid of the ... boxes and dust and Hoover the living room.’

It was never going to be that easy.

‘I’ll dust. You Hoover.’

‘OK,’ I said, feeling a little bit happy for the first time in ages.

We compromised again that evening. I had a delicious dinner on a tray on my lap in the newly cleaned living room. A fire crackled merrily in the grate. The curtains were closed and I’d switched off the harsh overhead light and just kept the wall lamps. It was the kind of room that looked best in the evening.

Thomas and I watched a little television afterwards. I was relaxed and happy, looking around and thinking how much better everything was looking when the door opened and Russell Checkland walked in.

Chapter Six

My heart stood still. I stared up at the tall figure outlined by firelight and felt absurdly guilty – all my quiet pleasure in the day destroyed. I didn't know what to do. My legs were underneath me so I was in no position to move quickly, should I have needed to do so.

'Calm down,' said Thomas. 'This is Russell Checkland. You played together when you were children. He took on your Aunt Julia and won. Just sit still and see what happens.'

The world had stopped. Apart from the crackling fire and the irritatingly irregular tick-tock from the old clock in the corner, there was no sound. Gradually, I began to unclench.

Finally, he spoke. In a choked voice, he said, 'Sorry.'

He stepped forward as he said it and I was shocked. I don't know what had happened or where he'd been and I wasn't going to ask, but he was suffering. The shadows around his eyes were dreadful. At some point, he'd slept in his clothes. Even now, he wasn't completely sober. And he was exhausted. His hands were shaking. What could have done this to him?

I should say something, but I was so shocked that nothing was going to get through, so I stepped up to him and gently touched his arm. Close up, he smelled of drink, stale clothes, and sweat.

I went out into the kitchen. Mrs Crisp turned from the stove. I think she'd been crying. She said, 'If you can get him upstairs, I'll bring tea and maybe you can get him to eat some toast.'

That seemed a good idea, so I went back into the living room. He still stood exactly where I'd left him.

I took his hand and led him to his bedroom. He followed like a child.

I'm not sure what I'd expected his room to be like but it was just an ordinary room. Bigger than usual, with the crimson-covered bed on a small platform, but, apart from that, it was completely normal. Given its owner, I'd expected more. Some artistic statement maybe, or even monastic austerity, but there was nothing to grasp. No clues as to its owner's character. Maybe he was afraid to reveal his inmost self. Maybe he didn't know how. Everything was clean and in its proper place, but – bleak. Sad. Empty. In my head, I groped for the right word. Desolate. A room of disappointment. A framed photo of his mother stood on a chest of drawers by the window, but though I looked around as discreetly as I could, I couldn't see any of Francesca anywhere. If they had been here, they were gone now.

I sat him on the bed and pulled off his jacket and shoes. His clothes were wet. I said, 'Undress,' and went to run the shower. When I came out, he was just pulling his shirt over his head. Apart from that one word, he still hadn't said a thing.

I held the bathroom door open and he walked in. Closing it behind him, I turned down the bed and then picked up his clothes.

Mrs Crisp knocked gently. She passed me the tray, I handed her his wet things. She wouldn't come in. This was my job now. I put the tray on the bedside table.

He emerged from the bathroom, rubbing his hair dry and sat on the bed, not looking at me.

I said, 'Mrs Crisp brought you a tray,' and turned to walk out. He caught my wrist and seemed to be struggling for words. Welcome to my world.

I said, 'Do you want to talk to me?'

He nodded, so I pulled up a chair and sat down.

Nothing was emerging from this promising beginning, so I poured him some tea, sat quietly, and waited. No one knew better than me how tough this was.

He sipped the tea but pushed the toast away. I never thought I'd see Russell Checkland reject food.

He put his mug down and said, without looking at me, 'I saw Francesca. The night before we were to be married. She told me she loved me. That she never should have agreed to marry Daniel. That it was me. Had always been me. Everything I'd always wanted to hear. She – offered herself.'

I could feel Thomas close beside me, doing everything he could. I leaned towards him for strength and comfort, not wanting to hear any more.

He told me anyway, his voice thick with exhaustion, grief, and, I think, shame.

'It was what I'd always wanted. I'd wanted her for so long. She was coming back to me. I grabbed her. She smelled just the same. I ...'

For God's sake, don't tell me this. What did he think he was doing?

I rose from the chair to run away.

He grabbed my wrist again. His voice cracked. 'No, don't go. You have to know.'

'No, I don't,' I said, and struggled with him.

Thomas laid back his ears and bared his teeth. The atmosphere in the room suddenly got very ugly indeed.

Russell was aware of it without knowing why. I was never alone. He let me go, holding up his arms in a gesture of surrender.

'Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.' A flash of the old Russell came back. 'As you see, Jenny, I've made a bit of a mess of things.' Then it was gone again. His eyes clouded and his mouth set in a harsh, ugly line.

'I ... I said no. She laughed. I pushed her away. She hit me. It wasn't pretty. She cried. She was nearly hysterical. I wouldn't ... She spat at me. I held her until she was calm. I was crying myself. I gave her some water. She left. I didn't sleep.

'The next morning she came back. In that dress. She took my breath away. I rang Andrew. Said I'd meet him there. I didn't want him coming here and

seeing her.'

'You see, he always meant to go through with it,' said Thomas. 'That's encouraging.'

'She said I'd never marry you. That you weren't – never mind. She thought it was a scheme to make her jealous. She mocked. I got angry and threw her out. Literally. I pushed her into the car and told her never to come back. I may have hurt her. I was sorry afterwards. She begged me. I said I had a new life now. She drove away. I went into town. Parked somewhere. Had a drink to calm down. It didn't help, so I had another. And then some more. Then I got married.'

'Afterwards I ... After we were married, I didn't know what to do. I told myself to go somewhere and sober up and the next thing I knew I was waking up in the wildly misnamed honeymoon suite and you had gone. I thought you'd gone back to your aunt. I wouldn't have blamed you.'

I topped up his tea.

'If you want to go, I'll understand and I'll do everything I can to help you. Between us, we can fix this. You know what I mean.'

He wanted me to go.

I panicked. Full-blown, flat-out panic that robbed me of all speech, thought, movement, almost life itself. Everything just came apart and I was falling.

'Breathe,' said Thomas, softly. 'Breathe, my darling girl. Just breathe.'

I did and the world came back into focus again.

Russell passed me his tea. 'Here. Drink some of this.'

Things began to reassemble. My first thoughts were full of fear.

I was to be divorced. Annulled. Whatever. I couldn't go back to live with Aunt Julia. She'd never let me out of her sight again. I wouldn't even be able to go to the library on my own. They might even decide it was time for 'that special place'.

My next thoughts were angry. This marriage was his idea. He'd pushed it through. He'd made a deal. We'd made a deal. I provided the cash. He provided the home. And now, because of that ... because of Francesca, who only had to lift her beautifully manicured little finger, he was going to throw his bright, new start to the four winds and pull what little remained of his life down around his own ears. And mine.

My next thoughts were of others. Francesca wouldn't live here. This wasn't designer dilapidation. This was the real thing. She'd hate it. She'd make him sell. Without my money, he'd have to. Even if he got a reasonable price for it – which he wouldn't – Francesca was expensive and sooner or later, the money would be gone. And then Francesca would be gone. Again.

And if he did induce her to live here, she would have Mrs Crisp out in a flash. An eccentric housekeeper who drank a bottle of sherry a day was not Francesca's style at all. She'd make her go. Or, more likely, she'd make Russell do it and that would break both their hearts.

And Kevin, granted a brief cruel glimpse of normal life before being

shunted back on to the streets again where he certainly wouldn't survive.

And Boxer; what would become of a neurotic ex-racehorse who could be terrorised by a line of washing flapping in the breeze?

I looked at the state of him and wondered whether to talk to him now or go back to my room, which was what every bit of me clamoured to do. Perhaps it would be better to wait until morning when everyone was calmer.

Even as I watched him, he opened his eyes. 'Jenny, are you able to speak to me?'

I nodded.

'The most important thing at the moment is that you don't suffer from my stupidity. I will sort all this out. I'll make sure you're all right, you'll see.'

I felt a spurt of unaccustomed anger run through me.

'Oh, for God's sake, Checkland, just stop with that ... bollocks, will you?'

That pulled him up short.

'I've lost count of the ... number of times you've said that to me. Lies then. Lies now.'

It was probably a bit like being savaged by a wet tissue, but it was effective in its unexpectedness. He looked completely taken aback. I remembered Tanya, who dealt with Andrew simply by announcing what she was going to do and then going right ahead and doing it. I took advantage of his surprise.

'Exactly what do you want, Russell?'

He gaped at me. 'What?'

'A ... simple question. Until three days ago, you wanted ... me. My money, anyway. You wanted this house. To paint again. To have a fresh start. Now you say you don't want me. Now it's Francesca ... Make up your ... mind, Russell and ... let ... me ... know.'

I got up. I'd shot my bolt. I needed to go somewhere quiet. Thomas came forward and stood between us. My shield.

'Well, that was unexpected but satisfactory. Let's go now while he's still trying to regain his wits. Always have the last word.'

We headed towards the door.

'Wait, Jenny, come back a minute.'

'Don't go back. Stand by the door and look as if you can't wait to get away. Yes, that's very good.'

'I don't want you to leave.'

I looked at the tray. 'You've got tea and toast. Everything you need.'

'No, I mean I don't want you to leave Frogmorton. I told you I sent her away. I was just trying to tell you what happened. To offer you the option. Where did you get the idea I wanted you to go? I meant what I said about a new beginning. We did get married, didn't we?'

'You call this a ... marriage?'

My shout surprised all of us.

'You were drunk. You turned up with your mistress. You –'

'She's not my mistress.'

His shout bounced off the walls.

‘You’re not sleeping with her?’

‘No.’

‘But ...’

‘Oh, I don’t deny I would have and there have been some steamy sessions that drove me insane, but no. Until she turned up here ...’ He stopped.

‘So her plan is that I move out, she leaves Daniel, and you install her in my place?’

I have to say, put that baldly, it did sound bad, but that wasn’t the real reason for the look on his face. He was rummaging through his probably very hazy memories of the last few days and realising ...

‘She never told him she would leave Daniel. She’s never going to leave Daniel. Or his money. Or his nice house. Or his useful contacts. She just wanted Russell to call off the wedding. She wants sole ownership of Russell Checkland. I tell you, Jenny, if you don’t stand your ground now, she’ll get it. Think of the damage she can do. If you let her.’

‘What can I do?’

‘You’ve got to fight for him, Jenny. If you think he’s worth it.’

I looked at Russell again, worn out, emotionally and physically. I thought of those few golden weeks and contrasted them against the bitter humiliation of this marriage. How had I managed to get myself into this? Had I really been so stupid as to fall for the unorthodox charm of Russell Checkland?

Apparently, yes.

Idiot!

I turned to the door again. The emotional strain of the last three days had taken its toll on everyone and I just wanted to get away.

‘Jenny.’

I went back to the bed, took his empty mug from him, and set it down.

‘Go to sleep, Russell. Talk tomorrow.’

He struggled to sit back up again. ‘Will you still be here?’

‘I have to be. I left my home for you. Unlike you, I don’t have choices.’

‘*Excellent exit line,*’ said Thomas.

Mrs Crisp was coming down the corridor with a mug of hot chocolate.

‘I thought you might like this, Mrs Checkland.’ She peered into my face. ‘Oh, my dear.’

I allowed her to help me to my room. She settled me on the bed and spread a soft blanket across my legs.

‘Don’t you come down again tonight. I’ll lock up and see to everything. You just rest now. Things will seem better in the morning.’

I nodded, still clutching the too-hot mug.

She said sadly, ‘He’s just a lost boy, you know.’

After she’d gone, I got up and locked the door. Not that there was the slightest reason to do so, but I felt I was making a statement.

I sat in the window seat and stared out over the dark garden.

'I was proud of you, Jenny. You really stepped up there.'

I shook my head.

'Don't you remember? When we first met, you asked me why I was here and I told you that you were special. Well, you just proved it. I've always known and now others will know it too.'

I was angry. 'Thomas ...'

'I know,' he said, gently. 'But as always, you underestimate yourself. The rest of the world does too, including that idiot in the next room, and that's fine because by the time they realise their mistake, you'll have everything you want. But don't you fall into the same trap.'

'But ...'

'If life was easy then everyone would get it right first time. A few do. You might be one of them.'

He'd changed. In this last hour he'd become – tougher.

So had I, I think. We had a future to fight for.

I slept a little and was up early. My instinct was to stay in my room until Russell had gone out, but Thomas wasn't having any of that.

'It's your house,' he said, firmly. 'Get out there and mark your territory.'

'You want me to spray?'

'If you feel it's necessary, but why not try a more conventional approach first? See how that works out. However, if you're hell-bent on spraying then I'm right behind you. Figuratively speaking, you understand.'

As he intended, my world lightened a little. He was right. If I was going to navigate my way safely through the rocky reefs of Francesca and Russell's relationship, I wasn't going to be able to do it from my bedroom.

I went downstairs to speak to Mrs Crisp. Kevin was just finishing his breakfast. He nodded a brief good morning, grabbed his mug, and departed.

I chose toast because it was quick and easy and I wanted to talk to Mrs Crisp. I wanted to ask her if she would teach me how to cook. It was all very well Thomas talking about staying and fighting, but I wanted to acquire skills that would enable me to live in the world I could see myself being evicted into before very long. I had a feeling Francesca would be back and Russell couldn't say no for ever.

'Yes, of course,' she said when I asked her if she would teach me to cook. 'What a good idea.' If she had any idea why I wanted to learn, she kept it to herself.

'I did ... cooking at school,' I said, trying to show willing. 'But I wasn't very good.'

'That's no problem,' she said, briskly. 'We'll start with the basics. How about I show you how to poach an egg? To put on your toast.'

Right now?

'Um, yes, all right,' I said, losing my nerve now we were about to start.

Thomas chuckled.

'Stop that,' I said. 'Or you'll be the one eating it.'

He sighed. *'I'm a horse. We don't eat eggs.'*

'You ate my Easter egg last year.'

'That doesn't count. Pay attention, 007.'

There followed pans of water, salt, eggs, simmering, and then she laid a perfectly poached egg on my toast and said, 'Your turn.'

There followed a period of activity and anxiety and then we threw the pan away. The poached egg was still in it.

'What happened?' asked Thomas, as we made our way up the lane to get some fresh air and recover a little.

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I did everything exactly as Mrs Crisp did, but the egg just wouldn't come out of the pan.'

'Yes. I've never seen an egg spot-weld itself to a pan before.'

I shook my head, depressed at my failure.

'It was funny, though. I think my favourite bit was when she seized the pan with both hands and shook it and the yolk went up the wall.'

I tried to keep a straight face.

Up on the moors, I sat on a wide flat rock by the stream and watched Thomas run.

He thundered effortlessly up the hill, mane and tail flying, kicking up his heels for the sheer joy of living. I watched his muscles bunch and stretch as he lengthened his stride and galloped along the crest of the hill, a dark silhouette against the blue sky, encapsulating all the grace and power and beauty and freedom I would never know.

While he was gone, I bent over the water and looked for fish. The water was brown but clear. I could see all the way down to the stony bed. There were no fish that I could see.

I thought about the last few days, blinking back tears. No, I wasn't going to cry. That wouldn't help at all.

Thomas reappeared, jumping the stream in one fluid moment. For a moment he was a perfect arc above the water and time stood still. Then he was beside me, blowing in my hair.

I was envious.

'Well,' he said. *'Maybe one day you'll be galloping across the moors, too.'*

But I'd rather stopped believing things people were telling me.

'Don't.'

'Don't what?'

'Don't stop believing. Ever. Without belief, there is no hope. And without hope, there is nothing. Always believe and then you'll always have hope.'

I stood on tiptoe and gently kissed his nose.

'Shall we get back, or do you want to turn a few somersaults?'

'Hey, that would be good, wouldn't it? Imagine the world of show jumping if horses learned to do the Fosbury Flop.'

I couldn't help laughing.

We made our way back down the lane, laughing and pushing each other

and generally messing about. I was feeling so good that I completely forgot I was married. Until I walked into the kitchen and saw my husband sitting at the table. He was finishing his breakfast. Mrs Crisp was tidying away. The egg yolk was off the wall.

I stopped dead, feeling the laughter drain away. I nodded formally. 'Good morning,' although it was probably afternoon by now, and walked through into the living room. He followed me in.

'Have you got a minute?'

I had more minutes than anyone I knew.

He looked better. Still a bit shell-shocked, but definitely better.

Feeling the need of a business-like setting and the reassurance of my own laptop, I sat at the table by the window. Perhaps he felt the same because he pulled out a chair opposite, pushed aside a mass of unpaid bills, and placed a small package on the table, saying awkwardly, 'I meant to give this to you at our wedding, but I never got the opportunity. Please – open it.'

The paper was crinkled and there were great lumps of creased sticky tape all over it. He'd wrapped it himself. He'd overdone the tape so it was a bit of a struggle to get into it, but I persevered.

A small watch nestled inside a little black velvet bag. Tiny diamonds glinted around the face and the bracelet was delicately wrought. It looked old and it wasn't in a jeweller's presentation box. I looked at him.

'It was my mother's. You have pretty hands. I thought it would look nice. Try it on.'

I slipped it over my wrist and it fitted perfectly. I twisted my wrist backwards and forwards, watching light play on the tiny diamonds. It had been his mother's. And he'd given it to me.

'It's ... beautiful. Thank you.'

He took my hand. 'I'm sorry.'

It was a simple apology, quietly made and meant far more to me than the overwrought utterances of the night before.

'Are we friends again?'

I nodded.

'No divorce?'

I shook my head.

He said, quietly, 'Good,' then cleared his throat and got up from the table to look out of the window.

Fortunately, the telephone rang. I heard Mrs Crisp answer it. After a moment, she tapped on the door.

'Do you know where your car is?'

'Oh Lord, no. I can't even remember where I left it.'

'Well, I don't know where it was, but I know where it is now. That was Miss Bauer. She's sitting in her office and has just watched your car being towed down the High Street.'

He was galvanised into action. Saving your marriage was all very well, but

this was his Land Rover. 'What?'

'She's still on the phone if you want her.'

He grabbed the receiver. 'Tanya? When? Where? Shit. On my way. Mrs C., can you get me a taxi please?'

She went out. He grabbed his jacket.

'Jenny, I've got to rush. It's Friday and I bet they're closed over the weekend. I'll see you later.'

A door slammed and the room was full of the lack of Russell Checkland.

'So, still married, then?'

'It would seem so.'

'Good or bad?'

'God knows.'

'Let's have a look at the watch. Actually, it's very pretty. Looks nice on you.'

I twisted my wrist again.

'Interesting. He's had it for years and never given it to Francesca. An idiot, but not a complete idiot.'

'Can we not talk about Francesca for a bit?'

'Good idea. What's for lunch?'

He turned up about four hours later, tense and sulky and with a large red mark on his cheek. I could tell by the way he was standing that he was still pretty tightly wound. He said nothing for a moment, and then took a deep breath.

I raised an eyebrow. A reluctant grin stretched his face. You had to hand it to him – he did have a sense of humour.

'She hit me.'

'Who?' I asked in bewilderment. Surely not Mrs Pargeter, our last, best hope against motorcar mayhem.

'Tanya. I called in to thank her. The least I could do. And if I'd been able to get a word in edgeways, I would have. She no sooner clapped eyes on me than she launched herself from behind her desk, yelled at me in German for about ten minutes, and then thumped me. These Germans really fetch a wallop, you know. Apparently, if I don't pull my stockings up (I'm sure she meant socks), anyway, if I don't pull up some item of hosiery then she's going to sort me out properly. She really is the most terrifying woman. I take my hat off to Andrew. Stop laughing. You are my wife and the companion of my bosom and I really expect more from you than giggling at my misfortunes. I'm in pain, you know.'

'Probably best not to mention that's two women who've hit him in the space of three days. It only needs you to have a go and he's got the hat-trick.'

'And it cost me about four times more than she's worth to get the damn thing back again, as well.

'Who, Tanya?'

'No, my car, of course. Concentrate, Jenny.'

'Sorry.'

He sighed. 'Shall we have something to eat and a quiet night in? Pretend we're a normal couple?'

I nodded.

Mrs Crisp regarded the bruise with an expert eye.

'Do you want some steak?'

'For internal or external application?'

She just smiled.

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

She smiled again, eyes not quite as unfocused as they usually were at this time of day.

'Dinner is served, Mrs Checkland.'

We sat down to our first meal as husband and wife. Russell kept up a constant flow of chatter, almost as if he was trying to keep something at bay with a wall of words. Finally, he drew breath.

'It occurs to me I have amends to make. Would you like to do something nice tomorrow? Shall we go out somewhere? Where would you like to go?'

'*Rushby*,' said Thomas instantly. '*Let's go and see the sea.*'

'I'd like to go to the ... coast,' I said. 'Can we go to Rushby?'

'Excellent idea. We'll have a wander along the beach, see if anything interesting has been washed up – a new roof would be good – fish and chips for lunch, have a go on the funicular railway, and, if you like, stop somewhere nice on the way back to eat. Good suggestion, wife. Feel free to make more whenever you feel like it.'

'Thank you,' I said, and the sarcasm wasn't lost on him. He grinned.

His phone rang.

Everyone knew who it was.

He scrambled in his pocket, dragged it out, looked at the screen, frowned, and put it away again, saying curtly, 'Voicemail.'

'Well,' said Thomas. '*I'm not happy that she rang, but thrilled he didn't answer it.*'

'Not now, anyway.'

'*No, really. That must be the first time ever that he's not taken a call from her. Imagine what's going through what passes for her mind. And we have a trip out tomorrow. I like Rushby. I can do my Chariots of Fire thing along the beach. Have you ever seen it? It's very impressive.*'

'Seriously?'

'Yes, *why not?*'

'It's a good job you're invisible.'

'*What's that supposed to mean?*'

We set off the next morning. Thomas and I were still discussing his *Chariots of Fire* performance.

'*I'm so excited,*' he said, as we climbed into Russell's recently rescued Land Rover.

‘Me too.’

Shame we never got there.

We bucketed down narrow lanes, taking what Russell called ‘the scenic route’.

‘*He’s lost,*’ said Thomas. ‘*How did he manage that? It’s not difficult, for crying out loud. You drive west for twenty minutes until you get wet and then you stop because you’ve fallen into the sea. Tchah!*’

I was about to comment on ‘Tchah!’ when Russell, who’d coaxed a reasonable speed from his rust-bucket, slammed on the brakes. Landscape whirled past the windscreen and the seat-belt dug painfully. We fishtailed across the lane and skidded to a halt in a shower of gravel. I bounced against my seat, sat stunned for a moment, and then rubbed my shoulder and neck.

Thomas hadn’t moved.

Russell was halfway out of the door when he remembered he was married to his passenger.

‘Are you all right?’

I nodded. I could talk later.

He disappeared.

‘*What on earth ...?*’ said Thomas.

I released my seat-belt, thanking God Russell was too poor for air bags. We were on the wrong side of the road but, by Russell’s standards, safely parked. I followed my galloping husband on slightly wobbly legs. He climbed over a gate and disappeared.

‘*Jenny, I’m so sorry. I think I may have encouraged you to marry a madman.*’

‘Yes, we’re going to be discussing this later. Oh.’

We reached a dilapidated gate, set in a straggly, sickly looking hedge.

On the other side was one of those awful, overgrazed fields you sometimes see from a train. An old railway truck slouched in the corner. There was no grass anywhere. After all the rain, everything was just a sea of mud.

For a moment, I could see nothing, but Russell was heading towards the back corner where a lump of mud moved and became a large dog.

No, not a dog. A very small donkey, now struggling to escape away from him. He walked slowly towards it and stopped a few yards away, talking softly. It was pitifully thin. Bones stuck out everywhere. There was absolutely no sign of food or water anywhere. The poor thing was so hungry it had chewed on the wooden rails. I could see lighter wood showing through.

I climbed over the gate.

The little donkey showed signs of panic, so I stood still and Russell moved away and went to investigate the old railway truck.

I said to Thomas, ‘Can you do anything?’

He said, ‘*I think so,*’ and went to stand close by, hooves sinking into the mud. Lowering his head, he nuzzled behind her ears. She stood still, not knowing why. Her ears drooped and her eyes closed.

‘Well done.’

‘I don’t think that’s me. I think she’s just too weak to put up any sort of fight.’

Russell came out of the truck, his face tight and angry. He took my arm. ‘You don’t want to go in there, Jenny.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’m afraid so. Come on, let’s go and look at the one we might be able to save.’

Thomas had done his work well. She stood quietly, head lowered, too weak and too distressed to struggle.

Russell stood for a moment, looked thoughtfully over his shoulder at the gate and then at me.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Need you ask?’

‘Right then, I don’t think she can walk, so ...’

He stepped forward, put one arm under her tail, another around her chest, and lifted a very surprised little donkey off the ground. She hung, legs dangling, and tried to eat his jacket.

‘Can you get the gate?’

He set off, staggering slightly in the mud and I squelched along behind, a fully-fledged accessory to donkey-napping.

The gate was padlocked.

Carefully, he set her down and she immediately started to eat my coat. Thomas lowered his head again.

‘Sometimes,’ said Russell, ‘you can get these gates off their hinges. Can you give me a hand?’ We got our shoulders under the top rail and the gate fell apart, so we could add property damage to the charge sheet.

He picked up the donkey again and we all set off down the road.

I said, ‘Should I put the gate back?’

I’m quite law-abiding.

‘No point.’

Russell isn’t.

He was angry, but not with me, so I hurried after him.

‘Jenny, I’m going to put her in the back. Will you sit with her and just try to keep her calm? I don’t think you’ll have any problems. I’m sorry, she’s covered in mud and worse, but I can’t see any other way and I want Andrew to see her as quickly as possible. Do you mind?’

‘No,’ I said, truthfully and scrambled in. He heaved her over and Thomas was there as well.

I heard him speak briefly on his phone and then the engine started up. She had a bit of a skitter, but Thomas worked his magic and we got back to Frogmorton mostly unscathed.

We backed into the yard and both Kevin and Mrs Crisp came out to see why we were back so early. I don’t know what they were expecting, but it probably wasn’t this.

Russell appeared and I passed her over. He stood with her in his arms, her legs dangling again as everyone gawped.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs Crisp, a little more unfocused than she usually was at this time of day and clutching her security tea towel.

‘It’s a dog?’ said Kevin, doubtfully.

‘Are you all right in there, Jenny? You got bumped about a bit.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Don’t worry about me. Stay with her in case she’s frightened.’

A car beeped in the lane and Andrew arrived. I had hoped Tanya might be with him, but he was alone. He crossed the yard and stood in front of Russell.

‘It’s a donkey,’ he said at last.

‘Good to see all those years at vet school have paid off,’ said Russell. ‘We lesser mortals were thinking it was a giant rabbit.’

Andrew looked around. ‘Where’s Jenny? You haven’t swapped her for a donkey, have you?’

‘I’m here,’ I said from the back. ‘I’m just a bit stiff and I can’t get out.’

Kevin gave me a hand and I tumbled gracelessly from the back of the Rover. ‘Good morning, Andrew. Thank you for coming.’

‘You know, you’re much too good for Russell. He’s never thanked anyone for coming in his life.’

‘Well, I have, but possibly in a completely different context. I don’t want to rush anyone, but although there’s not very much of her, I’d like to put her down soon. And she’s sucking my jacket again.’

‘Don’t let her do that – donkey digestion is quite fragile.’

Before anyone could move, however, she twisted her head, batted huge eyelashes at Russell, and widdled all down his front.

‘Oh, that’s a good sign,’ said Andrew. ‘Her kidneys are working. Kevin, can you put a few inches of warm water in a bucket for her, please. Don’t fill it up. I don’t want her to have too much too quickly.’

‘No,’ said Russell, grimly surveying his ex-trousers. ‘We wouldn’t want to overload her already fully functioning bladder.’

‘Let’s get her inside, then.’

We all trailed into the stables.

Russell put her down gently in the stall next to Boxer. She stood with all her legs at different angles, looking around her.

Andrew followed him in. ‘Have you ever noticed, Russ, sooner or later, all your women end up pissing on you from a great height? Although not usually this soon into your relationship.’

‘Just see to the donkey, will you? That’s why you’re here.’

‘No, I’m here for a free lunch, if the wonderful Jenny will have me.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with Jenny. I’m the head of the household. I make the decisions here.’

I spoke up. ‘Andrew, please stay for lunch.’

‘Thank you, Jenny. I’d love to.’ He was crouched low, peering at her feet.

‘Where’s our neurotic nit-wit this morning?’

‘Next door, breaking his neck trying to see what’s going on. Do you want me to take him out? Give her a bit of peace?’

‘No, donkeys are herd animals. She may find his presence reassuring.’

‘Are you sure? He’s not Brain of Britain, you know. It’s very likely she’s much brighter than he is.’

‘Russell, there are single-celled organisms that are brighter than your horse. Can you open the partition? Gently. We don’t want to frighten her.’

The result was not at all what we expected. We stepped back and she and Boxer got their first look at each other.

It was love at first sight. He stretched his neck towards her, blowing gently. She struggled to take a few steps, tottering like a cross between baby Bambi and Shaun the Sheep. She lifted her head to him, peering through those huge eyelashes, like Marilyn Monroe. Rachmaninov played in the background. Somewhere, a bluebird sang.

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Crisp. ‘How sweet.’

We all said, ‘Aaaaah.’ It was a magical moment.

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her whole body inflated. She braced her spindly legs.

‘*Oh-oh,*’ said Thomas. ‘*Incoming.*’

I always thought donkeys said, ‘Hee-haw.’ That’s how you always see it written. Nice and neat. And brief. Hee-haw.

Wrong. Our donkey goes:

‘EEEEEEEEAAAAAWWWOOOOAARGGHHH,’

pauses briefly for the echoes to die away and then continues with:

‘EEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAWWWWWEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAWWWWWOOOOOR

tailing away to a ghastly bubbling groan like a belligerent cockerel having its throat cut. And it was loud. Good God, was it loud. Birds fell from the trees. The windows rattled. A low-flying jet did a quick U-turn and returned to base to complain about the noise.

‘*Good grief!*’

‘Bloody Nora,’ said Andrew. ‘What the hell have you unleashed on the world now, Russ?’

Russell regarded his cousin indignantly. ‘You could have warned us.’

‘How the hell was I supposed to know she sounded like the Texas Chain Saw Massacre? How can such a tiny thing produce so much noise? Is everyone all right?’

‘I think my ears are bleeding,’ said Russell.

‘No one cares about you. You brought her here. This is all your fault.’

‘You can’t blame me for this. It was Jenny’s idea to go to Rushby.’

They both turned to look at me.

‘You mean you abandoned your wife’s lovely day out to cover her with donkey slime?’

It was true. I was covered in the many body fluids a sick and frightened

donkey can produce in what it perceives as a crisis. Never mind Russell's jacket. They were going to have to send me to the cleaners as well.

Andrew became business-like, unfastening his case. 'Russell, you can stay. Everyone else leave now please, so I can have a good look at her.'

We trailed out. Mrs Crisp made me stand on a newspaper while she helped me off with my coat, which had borne the worst of it. The rest of me wasn't too bad.

The three of us had a cup of tea.

Kevin was enthusiastic. 'She's so cool. Can we keep her?'

'She's stolen property,' I said, remembering. 'We're all going to prison.'

'No,' said Mrs Crisp. 'Not looking at the state of her. She looks as if she's been abandoned. And for some time too.'

I remembered the railway truck Russell wouldn't let me go into.

'Suppose the owner turns up and wants her back?'

She shook her head. 'He won't let her go back. He was like this as a boy. The place was full of sick strays. He kept them all. Once you get rescued by Russell Checkland, that's pretty well it for life.'

Kevin was pursuing his own train of thought.

'We should give her a name.'

'Dora,' said Mrs Crisp. 'Dora the Donkey. That's pretty.'

'Or Boomer. That's a good name for her.'

'Boomers are kangaroos.'

'But she booms. It's like her voice comes down a wind tunnel.'

'What's going on here?' said Russell, bounding in through the mudroom. 'Why are you all sitting around enjoying yourselves? I don't pay you to sit around being happy. I want to see you working. Especially if Jenny's going around inviting any Tom, Dick, or Andrew to lunch. Less happiness. More work. Not you, Jenny. You can sit around if you like.'

'*Big of him*,' said Thomas.

No one moved.

'We're thinking of a name for the little donkey.'

'Widdle.'

'Absolutely not.'

'How about Tiny? She's very small.'

Kevin's eyes sparkled. 'I know. I've got the perfect name. Mrs Crisp is right. She is tiny. We can call her ...'

He paused for effect.

'Yes?'

'Short Ass.'

Chapter Seven

The discussion over what to call her lasted all through lunch. I listened to Russell and Andrew slagging off each other's choices. Mrs Crisp made an occasional suggestion. After they'd argued themselves to a standstill, I put down my spoon and said, 'Marilyn.'

They'd moved on to exactly whose fault it was the toilet window had been broken back in the mists of time and it took them a while to refocus.

'Marilyn,' I said again. They still stared. I could see I would have to make it easy for them.

'Marilyn', I said for the third time. 'After Marilyn ... Monroe. You know, because of that look through her eyelashes.'

'I'm pretty sure Marilyn Monroe never widdled on anyone,' said Russell.

'Yes, but I can see what Jenny's getting at,' said Andrew. If she ever had – widdled on someone, I mean – she would have just that look on her face. Good choice, Jenny. Marilyn it is. Is there any crumble left?'

'No. Don't you have a home to go to? Where is Tanya anyway? Did she get fed up with you? I said she would, you know.'

'Gone to London for a couple of days. Back tomorrow night.'

'Got sick of you, did she?'

'On the contrary, she's so overwhelmed by her great good fortune that she needs to get away occasionally, to get her breath back. Of course, she doesn't put it quite that way, but basically, that's what she means. Anyway, back to Marilyn. It's quite simple, Russ. Warm water, barley straw, no new hay. The odd carrot or apple. If she starts getting a roll of fat on her neck then you're overfeeding her. I'll have a word with the donkey centre and get you details of their farrier. Her feet are shocking, but I think, with regular trimming and exercise, they'll improve. You may find she pines for her own kind, but Boxer seems to have imprinted himself on her so keep them together, if you can. I'll call in tomorrow – for lunch – and a couple of times next week, as well. She's going to take a bit of work, Russ. Are you sure you're up for this?'

He nodded.

I asked, 'Russell, what happens if her owner wants her back?'

'Well, he can't have her back. But he won't. He'll have the police, the RSPCA, and massive vet's bills waiting for him. Speaking of which, Andrew, this is more than you just peering at Boxer occasionally and telling me he's a loony. What do I owe you?'

Andrew shrugged. 'You'll have to pay for all her drugs and what-nots, I'm afraid, but give me a good lunch and we'll forget the rest.'

I smiled at him. He smiled back.

I said, 'I'll ask Mrs Crisp to pack you some of her scones, if you like?'

As I went out, I heard him say, 'So, how's your face?'

I shut the door behind me.

Mrs Crisp already had a care package ready for him.

‘He’ll be here for lunch again, tomorrow, Mrs Crisp. Does he have a favourite?’

‘He’s a roast beef and Yorkshire boy. I’ll see to it.’

Both Thomas and Kevin were still with Marilyn, I wandered over to have a look and, as I stood watching her, Andrew came in and started packing up his kit.

‘Everything all right?’ he said, quietly.

I couldn’t lie to him so I said nothing.

He fiddled with his case and then said, ‘I have no right to ask this, but if you could stick with him, I’d be quite grateful.’

I had a big lump in my throat.

‘I know it’s not easy. He’s not easy ... but you’re his last chance. Don’t let that ...’ he suddenly remembered Francesca was my cousin. ‘She doesn’t want him. She just doesn’t want anyone else to have him. It suits her very well to have him on a string and he’s wasting his life. She’s wasting his life. He needs to start painting again and he’s convinced himself he can’t do it without her.’

I nodded.

‘Told you.’

He put his hand on my shoulder, ‘And stay away from your aunt. If you need help – come to us. I’ll hide behind the curtains and send Tanya in to bat for you.’

I choked on a laugh.

‘That’s better. See you tomorrow.’

‘Roast beef,’ I said.

He lifted my hand and kissed it.

‘What are you doing?’ said Russell.

‘Roast beef tomorrow.’

‘That’s no excuse. Go away now.’

I went back to look at Marilyn, hardly able to believe the events of the day.

She stood in the middle of her big stall, dwarfed and bewildered. Kevin had put a small pile of straw in the corner for her to sleep on.

‘Although actually, we could probably just put her in a dog basket.’

‘Thank you for looking after her.’

‘No problem. Shame about our day out. And your coat will never be the same again.’

‘Ah, well.’

She sipped her water and began to Hoover up her bedding.

‘Look at her eat. Should she be doing that?’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘I’m a horse.’

‘Well, that’s nearly a donkey.’

'No, it isn't. Ah, here comes the young master.'

Russell wasn't in a good mood. I wasn't sure what the problem was. He halted, fidgeting. 'What did Andrew say?'

'Oh, nothing much. Just asked what was for lunch tomorrow and he'd see us then.'

He scowled and wandered off.

'Interesting.'

'What is?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

Marilyn recovered like a rocket. She trained us not to leave anything lying around because she ate it. She trained us to satisfy her every demand because otherwise she would close her eyes, screw up her face like a kid having a tantrum, expand her lungs, and exceed the legal decibel limit.

Then just when she had caused maximum exasperation or consternation, she would look up at us through her fringe and smile and we were putty in her hands.

Kevin brushed her carefully – she had some quite nasty sore patches – and she turned out to be a very pretty soft dun colour under all the mud. Her broad head tapered down to a narrow nose and her huge dark eyes peered trustingly out at the world. Her feet were awful, but the farrier said they would improve. He trimmed away and for a few days she could hardly hobble at all. It was pitiful. Andrew shot her some painkillers.

We put her out in the yard for a couple of hours every day. She stuck her head in things that didn't concern her, tried to eat the washing, was shooed out of the mud room, and pushed her head out through the gate to check out passers-by. One of whom was our neighbour, Martin Braithwaite, walking down to the village one day.

'Ah,' he said, enlightened. 'A donkey! I must tell Monica. She was convinced someone was being chain-sawed.'

'Sorry about that,' said Russell, leaning on the gate. 'Little Big Voice.'

'I'm on my way for a quiet pint. Care to join me?'

'Yes,' said Russell and slipped through the gate. 'Let me tell you about the trials of donkey owning. You coming, Jenny?'

I shook my head. I had something else to do.

He seemed surprised. 'Oh. OK then. Is that because Andrew is coming? Again?'

'Maybe. See you later,' and I shot off, because I'd just seen Kevin disappearing round the corner and I wanted a word.

Thomas seemed amused. *'Oh, Jenny.'*

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'What's nothing?'

'Nothing at all. There's Kevin.'

'Hi, Mrs Checkland.'

‘Hello. Are you busy?’

‘I have to turn Boxer out, and then I’m not.’

We led Boxer into his terror-infested field. He bade Marilyn a fond farewell and she went off to see if the water trough had suddenly become edible. Boxer flew off down the field, tail kinked over his back. ‘Shaking the tickles out of his feet,’ Kevin said fondly, watching him go.

I looked at Kevin. He wasn’t the same boy we’d found that night. Even in this short time, he’d filled out. And, thanks to an almost non-stop food intake, he’d grown some more. He was going to be a big lad. With his bruises gone and his smart new haircut, he looked comparatively normal – for someone living someone at Frogmorton, I mean.

He was still very quiet, still unsure of himself and us, almost as if he was afraid to relax in case he was kicked out again. He was so pathetically eager it was heart-breaking. He threw himself at everything, desperate for acceptance and approval. He kept his little room spotless, as I noticed when I took him clean sheets. Russell said he wouldn’t – shouldn’t – stay for ever, but we could offer him a breathing space while he worked out what to do with his life.

It often amazed me that Russell could be so perceptive in some areas and so bloody stupid in others.

Anyway, this morning, I was a woman on a mission.

‘Kevin,’ I said when he joined me again. ‘What do you know about gardening?’

He hesitated. I could see he wanted to say, ‘Lots,’ because that was the answer I wanted, but he was an honest lad.

‘Nothing.’

‘Me neither. Come with me.’

We let ourselves through the wonky garden door and into the walled jungle I could see from the living room. There were no leaves at this time of year, but some bulbs were beginning to poke through the tangled undergrowth. Overgrown was not the word to describe it.

‘No,’ said Thomas. *‘It passed overgrown about ten years ago. Are you insane? This is a lifetime’s work.’*

‘Exactly,’ I said, nodding towards Kevin who was extricating himself from something thorny.

‘Ah, I see.’

We worked our way up to one of the French windows and turned back to survey the garden. It was a bit daunting. I seriously wondered about getting some people in – one of those motorway gangs would be my first choice, together with half a dozen JCBs and a good supply of Agent Orange. But no, that wasn’t the point.

Kevin was kicking his foot into the ground. ‘There’s stone under here. Probably some sort of terrace that would have run along the back of the house and probably there would be sets of steps. Yes, look,’ ripping away something

dead and brown. 'There's a bit of stone balustrade here, underneath all this – stuff. And I think these – ouch – yes, there's roses growing – ouch – round the doors. Ow! Aren't they supposed to be pruned? I'm sure my dad ... Ouch!'

'OK,' I said. 'Find ... gardening tools and stuff. And something thick to wear. Meet here in ten minutes.'

He disappeared and I went to look up rose-pruning on the Internet.

When he reappeared with a wheelbarrow stuffed full of dangerous and unfamiliar implements, I spread three sheets of paper on the ground and we studied them carefully.

'Well, these are either climbers or ramblers,' he said slowly. 'We should be looking for outward facing buds. Oh, look, there's one. And take out the dead wood. No, don't put your arm in there, Mrs Checkland, I'll do it.'

We made a start. We were a little tentative at first, and then got bolder. Huge swathes of prickly stems fell down on our heads.

Thomas retreated to a safe distance. '*I can see why princesses surround themselves with this stuff,*' he said. '*Except in this instance, it's the princess herself hacking down the brambles.*'

We kept at it and, after half an hour, we reckoned we could get the door open. I ran round the house into the living room and fumbled with the key. It wouldn't move. Kevin mouthed something at me and disappeared, reappearing behind me with a can of something a few minutes later and frightening me to death.

We squirted, he strained, we squirted again, the key turned, and the door opened. We cheered. You had to be there.

We walked in and out half a dozen times, just because we could.

'Shall we do the next one?' he asked and I nodded.

Another half an hour and there was ten times more rose bush lying on the ground than growing up the walls. Kevin started pitchforking it into the wheelbarrow.

'Now,' he said enthusiastically. 'We need a bonfire.'

I was enthusiastic too. I'd never had a bonfire before.

We lugged it all round the back to the old buildings where Russell parked his Land Rover. Within minutes, it was crackling merrily away, enveloping us in clouds of smoke.

We fought our way out, coughing and waving our arms. I stared at him. He was grimy, mud-streaked, leaking blood from half a dozen not-very-serious scratches, and reeked of wood smoke.

'He's not the only one. The two of you look like prisoners on a chain gang.'

Mrs Crisp appeared.

'Mrs Kingdom is here to see you.'

'Oh,' said Thomas.

'And Miss Kingdom as well.'

'Oh, shit,' said Thomas.

My happy afternoon vanished into the smoke of the bonfire. I could only

stare at her. What? Where? Aunt Julia here? Now?

Kevin melted away.

She was sympathetic. 'I'm sorry, but they've already seen you from the road. They know you're here.'

First things first. 'Where's Russell?'

'Still in the village.'

This was Mrs Crisp speak for 'Still in the pub.' I didn't want to face them alone, but if he came back plastered then he could be a bit of a double-edged weapon.

'You're not alone,' said Thomas. 'Now wash your face and hands, give them a quick cup of tea, and get rid of them before he gets back.'

'Francesca is here. What does she want?'

'Well, at a rough guess she wants the master of the house to see what he's missing. Come on.'

I followed Mrs Crisp back through the mudroom.

'They're in the living room, Mrs Checkland,' she said, gesturing. 'I'll bring in some tea.'

I washed my hands under the tap, wiped them on my jeans, and, wishing I had the firm tread of the acknowledged lady of the house, tiptoed into the living room.

They sat side by side on the sofa. Aunt Julia was wearing her 'Maybe if I don't touch anything then I won't catch anything,' expression. Francesca was dressed for country visiting with her hair piled casually on top of her head and tumbling carelessly down her back. She wore a close-fitting black top, skinny jeans, and killer heels.

I was wearing half a rose bush, a little mud across one cheekbone, and essence of wood-smoke. I'd kicked off my wellies and my socks were odd.

Aunt Julia rose slowly. She hadn't taken off her coat.

'Great! She's not stopping,' said Thomas. 'Shove some tea down her throat and get rid of her.'

'Thomas, she's my aunt. She's looked after me for twenty years. We'll give them a biscuit first and then chuck them out.'

'Hello, Aunt Julia,' was as much as I could manage. I ignored Francesca. This was my house. I hadn't asked her here and I saw no reason to acknowledge her presence. Maybe she'd take the hint and go away.

'You wish,' said Thomas.

Aunt Julia was staring at me in horror. 'Jenny, what have you been doing?'

'Gardening,' I said, cheerfully.

In Aunt Julia's world, gardening was a supervisory activity. She pointed – other people dug.

'But – you're bleeding. What has he done to you?'

'Nothing. Roses are prickly.'

'But – why are *you* doing it?'

'I like it.'

Her chest heaved and her massive restraint only emphasised her anger.

‘Where – is – Russell – Checkland?’

‘*Oops,*’ said Thomas. ‘“*Down the pub*” *may not be the best answer.*’

As always, in times of crisis, words packed it in for the day.

At that moment, for better or for worse, the back door slammed. The villain was back.

He slouched in, cheerful but not completely inebriated. The sight of Francesca on his sofa wiped the smile off his face. Staring at her, he missed Aunt Julia and me completely. But then, he never saw anyone else if Francesca was in the room.

Aunt Julia, however, had no difficulty identifying her target. I retreated to the window. They could get on with it without me.

‘*Good move,*’ said Thomas. ‘*Let them slug it out and we’ll just deal with the last man standing. Whoever that may be.*’

Francesca had risen at his entrance. For an endless time they looked at each other. He didn’t bother with a greeting. ‘Why are you here?’

‘We’ve come to visit the newly-weds.’

Was there a mocking note there?

She wafted towards him. He stepped back warily. ‘I wouldn’t if I were you. I’m covered in donkey slather.’

‘*That stopped her dead,*’ said Thomas.

‘Yes,’ he said with alcohol-induced cheerfulness. ‘We have a sick donkey. She leaks from every orifice. Speaking of which, how are you, Julia?’

She went straight into attack mode.

‘Better than poor Jenny, by the looks of things, Russell.’

‘Oh God, we’re not back to “poor Jenny” again, are we? What’s the matter now?’

‘Are you blind? Look at the state of her.’

‘Julia, it’s only odd socks. No need to have a cow.’

She swelled again. ‘I can only assume you are being deliberately provocative. I visit my niece and she’s bleeding.’

He barely glanced at me. ‘Roses get you, did they? Vicious little buggers. I’ll lend you my motor cycle helmet. It has a visor. Problem solved, Julia.’

‘*No, it’s not,*’ said Thomas.

‘No, it’s not,’ she said. ‘She looks so tired and unhappy. What have you been doing to her?’

‘Well, she didn’t look tired and unhappy when I left a couple of hours ago so what have you been doing to her?’

‘What have *I* been doing to her?’

‘I just said that. Try to keep up, Julia. Have the two of you been drinking?’

‘You do not divert me from questioning your treatment of my niece. I demand to know what’s going on here and I don’t leave until I do.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Jenny, tell her will you? Otherwise she’ll be here until Christmas.’

‘I don’t know what all the fuss is about,’ said Francesca, annoyed at being overlooked for so long. ‘It’s not as if it’s a real marriage, is it? Russ only did it to make me jealous and she did it because she’s desperate.’

That shut everyone up.

I got up quietly and walked out. Mrs Crisp, standing helplessly with the tea trolley, held the door open for me.

I put on my wellies, walked across the yard, through the garden, and back to the bonfire. There was a whole garden and several walls between them and me and I could still hear the shouting.

I found a stick and poked the smouldering bonfire, because you can’t help poking a bonfire. The ashes dimmed. It began to get dark.

Somewhere a door slammed and a car started. Even the engine sounded angry.

But not as angry as me. Not as hurt as me. Or as humiliated as me. Or as stupid as me. I poked and poked and the fire began to go out.

‘Jenny,’ said Thomas gently. ‘*Just why are you so upset?*’

I wasn’t going to answer that one. Even to myself I wasn’t going to answer that one.

Eventually I heard footsteps and Russell appeared. He sat beside me and draped an old jacket over my shoulders. I hadn’t realised how cold I was.

‘I have good news and I have bad news.’

I didn’t care.

‘The good news is that relations are completely severed. Apparently they will never darken any of our doors again and we certainly won’t be darkening theirs.’

I said nothing.

‘The bad news is that I’m worried my wife will never speak again. Can you say something, please, if only to put my mind at rest.’

Painfully, I dragged the words out.

‘I want a ... divorce.’

‘Those are not the words to put my mind at rest.’

I hit him on the arm.

‘*Hat-trick,*’ said Thomas.

‘Ow!’ he said, rubbing his arm. ‘What –?’

‘Enough. I want a divorce.’

‘Jenny ...’

I tried to get up. He pulled me down. I hit him again.

‘*Well, that’s you ahead of the others now, on points.*’

‘Ow!’

I tried again to get up and he pulled me down again. ‘Stop. Stop. No, Jenny, just listen.’

No. I wasn’t going to listen any more. No more stuff about looking after me, about how I wouldn’t regret it. I was done with all that. I know it was my own fault. I’d made a big mistake but at least I could minimise the damage.

He was staring at me. 'You're serious, aren't you? You really want this?'
'Exactly how ... much ... must I endure ... before you see this is not working?'

He was silent a long time.

'I have an idea.'

'... Better or worse than the last one?'

'No, listen. I'm sorry about back there. I behaved badly. Everyone did. Except you. Believe me, Francesca will never come here again. Or Julia. But you need to think this through. We both do. We rushed into this. Let's not rush out again. You're cold. Come inside and have something to eat. We'll talk then. Come on.'

He pulled me up and we went inside. It was completely dark by now. Kevin had brought in Boxer and everything was locked up. I followed him into the house.

'We'll eat in the kitchen,' Russell told Mrs Crisp. She nodded and retired to her room.

I'm obviously not heroine material and far from picking at my food in the approved manner, I ate everything put in front of me.

'*That's my girl,*' said Thomas.

Finally, he made coffee and pulled his chair closer.

'OK, this is what I think. I'm not a monster and if you really want to go then of course you can. I'm not happy about it, but I certainly won't get in your way. But, and it's a big but, I don't think you should go immediately. We've barely been married a fortnight. There would be huge gossip. Half of them would say there must be something really wrong with you and the other half would say I treated you so badly you couldn't even stick it out for the first month. We neither of us want that. Let's wait twelve months and then we'll get a quiet divorce. We won't tell anyone, we'll just do it. I'm prepared to let your money go in return for your half of the house back, so we would both take away what we brought to the marriage. No more – no less. During the twelve months I'll help you find somewhere to live. You can rely on me to do everything I can to keep you away from your aunt. And we can part friends. That would be important to me. What do you think?'

I'd sat in this very kitchen, on this very chair in fact, when he'd proposed marriage, and now we were discussing divorce. How could everything go so wrong so quickly?

I nodded. It seemed a good plan. Better than his last one, anyway.

He plonked my coffee down in front of me.

'Right, that's settled then. Don't look so downcast, we can make this work. In the meantime, let's do something normal.' He reached across and pulled out a large sheet of paper.

'I understand you won't want to go lashing large amounts of money on the house now, but if you want to tackle the garden, I'd be very pleased. It's good for you and it's good for Kevin. Good thinking there, by the way. I thought

I'd do a quick sketch of the garden as I remember it and draw you up a plan. Now, there's a terrace along the back of the house, with steps opposite the French windows. Two paths run diagonally from corner to corner. But – and this is exciting – there's a fountain in the middle. The basin's about twelve feet across I think, with a statue of one of those hussies who can't keep her clothes on properly. She's clutching her robe with one hand and pouring water from a jug with the other. Finest pair of tits I've ever seen. In fact, until I was about fifteen, the only pair of tits I'd ever seen.'

I choked on my coffee.

'That's better,' he said approvingly. 'It's not so bad, Jenny. You'll see. Shall we go and watch some TV?'

I nodded and got up. It had been a long day.

So was the next day. I could hardly remember the time when one day was exactly the same as the rest.

The first thing that happened was that Sharon turned up and shortly afterwards Kevin was apparently struck by paralysis. And yes, the two events were connected.

Russell and I stood in the yard watching Marilyn hobble around, sticking her little head into everything.

Mrs Crisp was hanging out the washing and keeping a wary eye on the potentially tea-towel scoffing Marilyn.

Thomas was standing in the sun, resting a hip.

Kevin was wheeling the barrow across the yard, whistling.

So we were all there and we all saw.

Sharon opened the gate and slipped through, carefully fastening it behind her.

We all looked up. Marilyn skittered over to see if she was edible.

Sharon saw her aunt and smiled her blinding smile.

Kevin, not looking where he was going at all, pushed the barrow straight into the water trough.

Russell looked down at me, waggled his eyebrows and grinned. I grinned back. Life was a lot easier now we were getting a divorce. The pressure was off.

We both waited to see what would happen next. Mrs Crisp went forward to greet her. Sharon looked just as I remembered – apart from the small, beguiling donkey sniffing at her skirt.

I suddenly remembered I hadn't mentioned this to him.

'Sorry, I forgot. She's coming in for a couple of ... days a week to help Mrs Crisp.'

He was more interested in Kevin. 'Do you think I should go and wake him up?'

'No, leave him. If he lets go of the barrow he'll fall over.'

'Mr and Mrs Checkland, you remember Sharon, my niece.'

'Of course,' said Russell. 'How are you?'

'Very pleased to be here, sir.'

'Just a few rules,' he said. 'Please remember I am the master here. My rule is law. I expect my smallest wishes to be granted immediately and my bigger ones within ten minutes. I do not tolerate slacking off and any member of staff showing signs of happiness is subject to instant dismissal. Hours are long and full of toil. You may or may not get paid. Welcome.'

She giggled.

He sighed. 'Why doesn't that ever work?'

I said to her. 'Thank you for coming. We are very pleased to see you,' and it came out surprisingly easily.

'Yet another undiscovered benefit of divorce,' murmured Thomas, who seemed to be taking things remarkably well.

'A lot can happen in twelve months.'

He got that right.

Russell raised his voice. 'Kevin, come and say hello.'

His face was like a sunset.

She smiled, blushed, and looked at her feet. 'Hello.'

He mumbled something. It could have been hello.

Russell clapped him on the shoulder. 'We'll let Mrs Crisp show you around inside and then Kevin here can show you around outside. All right, Kevin?'

He mumbled something else.

'This is just cruel,' said Thomas. *'Someone put him out of his misery.'*

A car hooted in the lane and Kevin went thankfully to open the gate. Russell frowned. 'A bit early for Andrew. I thought he was coming tomorrow. Why is he here so often?'

Why was he cross with me?

'Oh, Jenny,' said Thomas.

It was Uncle Richard.

'Oh, shit,' said Russell. 'We're about to have our doors darkened. Oh no you don't.' I was just quietly melting away to the garden. 'I need backup and you're it. Besides, if I can't produce you in at least reasonable condition they'll think I've murdered you for your money and buried the body. A shame, because I would much rather have stood and watched our young loves blush at each other, but never let it be said a Checkland flinched in the face of danger. Come on, wife. You go first.'

It was reassuring to see that Uncle Richard looked at least as embarrassed as I felt. He preceded us into the house and I tugged Russell's sleeve. 'Did you call him?'

'No, did you?'

I shook my head.

'Well, let's go and find out what he wants.'

Uncle Richard declined tea, coffee, something stronger, any form of refreshment at all.

He seemed so distressed that I was distressed for him.

‘Uncle Richard?’

He sighed. ‘I’ve come about yesterday. I gather from what my wife and daughter have told me that – unfortunate remarks – were made.’

He got no further.

‘A remark was made that was so unfortunate as to cause my wife to leave her own home in some distress. I won’t deny that there were subsequent – unfortunate remarks – from both sides, but –’

‘I understand, Russell, but please try and understand these remarks sprang from concern over your wife’s well-being.’

‘If you can understand, sir, that these remarks were uncalled for and unjustified. That Jenny’s condition was not due in any way to the primitive conditions under which I apparently force her to live, but simply the result of extreme gardening. As anyone less prone to jump to the wrong conclusions would have seen immediately.’

‘He’s very good, isn’t he?’

‘I’m sure,’ said Uncle Richard, persevering, ‘that a reasonable and timely explanation from you could easily have resolved any incorrect conclusions drawn.’

‘I am equally certain, sir, that that would have been the case had I been allowed to utter said reasonable and timely explanations. And,’ he continued, pressing home his advantage, ‘I would be extremely grateful, sir, if you could advise your daughter that her uninvited visits here are neither appropriate nor welcome.’

‘Wow,’ said Thomas. ‘That’s really telling him. And her. And you too, Jenny. Good for him.’

Uncle Richard, far from taking offence, nodded silently. ‘I won’t deny, Russell, unpalatable though your words are, I’m glad to hear them. Yes, I will pass the message on.’

‘Thank you, sir. I appreciate it’s not a pleasant task, but it’s better coming from you than me. And certainly better than coming from Daniel, whom I’m reluctant to involve at all in this.’

‘I understand you, I think.’

Silence fell.

‘Well,’ said Thomas. ‘Typical of him. Now he gets his act together. Just when it doesn’t really matter any more. What is wrong with him?’

I was baffled too. Why couldn’t he have done that last week? Or last month? Why now? And did it make a difference?

Uncle Richard stirred. ‘I think, Jenny, if the offer is still open, I would like some tea after all.’

I jumped up and went to see Mrs Crisp. When I came back, Russell had handed him his credit card statements and receipts.

‘No, no, Russell, just the statement will be fine. Keep the receipts for your own records. I will assume that by passing me these, you are authorising payment.’

Russell paused.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I checked ... them all and everything is correct.’

Russell smiled. ‘You did? Well, thanks very much. I hate doing that. Can you do it every month?’

‘Of course, if you want me to.’

‘I very definitely do.’

So I had housework to supervise, cooking to learn, gardening to do, and accounts to reconcile. Just like a real person.

Mrs Crisp brought in some tea. In the best cups. Obviously, she liked Uncle Richard. Aunt Julia and Francesca were lucky they didn’t get theirs in a bucket.

‘I was wondering...’ said Uncle Richard, accepting a cup. ‘In fact Julia asked me to ask you ... as a gesture, you understand ... whether, if you aren’t doing anything tomorrow night, if you would like to ... dine with us?’

Fortunately, I wasn’t holding anything otherwise we’d be a best cup and saucer down and with another unfortunate stain on the rug. I’d lived there twenty years and I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I’d actually dined with them. Was this some sort of plot to get me back there? Once I walked in through the door I’d never get back out again?

I looked anxiously at Russell, who could add mind-reading to his other accomplishments.

‘Why not come here, Richard? Allow the newly-weds to entertain you. And,’ he said, with amused malice, ‘you’ll be able to check out Jenny’s living conditions at the same time.’

Fortunately, he took it as a joke.

‘Well, yes, how kind. That would be very kind. Julia and I would be delighted.’

Thomas said anxiously, ‘*Will you be cooking at all, Jenny?*’

Mrs Crisp was thrown into a complete panic.

‘What’s the problem?’ said Russell. ‘You cook every day. It’s just a case of adding two more people.’

‘It’s not that,’ she said. ‘It’s a dinner party – which is completely different. And it’s been so long. They dine out all over the place. They’ll expect –’

‘No, they won’t. It’s just a family dinner. Me, Jenny, Mr Kingdom, and his Rottweiler. No cause for alarm at all.’

She ignored him, reaching for her cookery books. He stopped her.

‘Jenny will choose the menu.’

This threw me into a complete panic as well.

‘Stop, stop,’ he said. ‘Everyone just calm down a minute.’

Sharon stepped forward with her dazzling smile. ‘I’ll help. I can do dessert if you like.’

Kevin muttered something.

‘You see,’ said Russell, apparently understanding this. ‘He’ll help too.’

Mrs Crisp turned to me. ‘What would you like me to serve tomorrow?’

‘Well, I like chicken.’

‘Yes, I could do chicken. With a wine sauce and grapes. A simple seafood salad to begin. I can make that in advance.’

‘Individual hazelnut tarts,’ said Sharon.

‘There you go,’ said the cause of all the trouble, triumphantly. ‘I knew as soon as you all stopped panicking we’d have it sorted. And you’ve nothing to be ashamed of, Mrs C. Your cooking made me the man I am today.’

Silence as his household contemplated the man he was today.

‘No,’ said Mrs Crisp, firmly. ‘You’re not putting all the blame on me.’

The rest of the day was just a blur. Banished from the kitchen, I attacked the little morning room, polishing and hovering until everything gleamed. We rummaged through the linen cupboard, finding bits and pieces we could use.

The best china came out, along with a canteen of cutlery. We sat down to polish while Mrs Crisp walked in and out of the pantry, muttering to herself, and the cause of all the trouble threw the whole thing into further chaos by announcing there would be two more. Andrew and Tanya.

Mrs Crisp stared at him.

‘What’s the problem? Just do a few extra potatoes.’

I took him away for a walk while she was still reaching for her battle tea-towel. We wandered up the lane and up onto the moors.

He said nothing about divorce – nothing just burbling happily away in his usual manner.

‘I don’t think he wants you to go.’

‘Well, I’m not. Not for another twelve months, anyway.’

‘I don’t think he wants you to go at all.’

‘That doesn’t seem likely. The sooner I’m gone, the sooner he can look around for another, less fragile source of income. Otherwise, he’s ditched Francesca for nothing.’

Thomas said nothing in the way that only he can.

‘Don’t you agree?’

‘I agree his money problems are still not solved. As for the rest of it ... Jenny, why isn’t he painting yet?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, ask him.’

‘What, just like that?’

‘Otherwise you’ll die of old age waiting to get a word in somewhere.’

Breathe once. And again. ‘Russell, how’s the painting going?’

He broke off. ‘Fair’s fair, Jenny. I’m up to here in donkeys, dinner parties, and divorce at the moment.’

I didn’t say anything.

He sighed. ‘Don’t do that.’

‘What?’

‘Not say anything.’

I didn’t say anything again.

‘Well, I don’t have any gear, of course. I threw it all away.’

‘There’s a very good art shop near the castle in Rushford.’

‘It’s not that easy.’

Breathe once. And again. ‘No, I know it’s not. You stopped painting because of Francesca. You told yourself you couldn’t do it without her. Then it stopped being a reason and became an excuse.’

He stopped and looked at me, then continued walking. ‘It’s a good job we’re getting divorced. You’re a bit scary sometimes.’

I wouldn’t let him change the subject.

‘You might be right. OK, you are right. I’m worried ... I worry I don’t have it any more. What I was painting then was my life as I saw it. Full of joy and exuberance and confidence. I took chances. They paid off. But I’m not the same person now. I don’t doubt I’ve still got the same technical expertise, but the spark, the thing that jumped from me to the canvas and burst into life – that’s gone. Without it, I might just as well paint walls for a living. And, quite honestly, I’m afraid to find out. So I keep putting it off. Because if it has gone ...’

I took his hand.

He seemed surprised, but didn’t try to pull away.

I said, ‘Do it. Take a chance.’

He smiled sadly and shook his head. ‘You don’t know what you’re asking.’

‘Yes I do. I took a chance. Now it’s your turn.’

We walked for a long time in silence. I wasn’t going to nag and I know from Aunt Julia that according to men, mentioning the same thing twice in one decade constitutes nagging, so I shut up.

‘Do you want to come to the shop with me?’

‘Love to.’

‘Well, all right, then.’

‘Good.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘Fine.’

‘Look, you’ve got your own way. Have the decency to let me have the last word, will you?’

‘OK.’

Chapter Eight

After all our efforts, the morning room looked lovely. Well, better than before, anyway. We had candles because although the walls had recently been beautifully painted, the curtains, rugs, and chair coverings were scruffy. By candlelight, it was shabby chic.

Russell was despatched to get the front door working. There was a lot of banging and cursing – all part of the male ritual, Thomas assured me, culminating in an ear-splitting screech which set Marilyn off.

‘We’re going to have the council round at this rate,’ shouted Russell. ‘Is anyone capable of doing anything quietly in this house?’

Sharon, laying the table at whisper-level, just grinned.

Russell and I were pushed upstairs to get ready. He resisted every inch of the way.

‘It’s only a family dinner, for heaven’s sake. Why can’t I wear jeans?’

Nobody bothered to reply and he stumped grumpily off to his room. My reminder that the whole evening was his fault was met with a frosty stare and the comment that the next twelve months couldn’t go quickly enough for him.

We regrouped in the kitchen. Mrs Crisp and Sharon wore black. I wore my long-sleeved black dress and Russell wore a black shirt and trousers.

‘Good grief,’ said Thomas. *‘It’s like a bunch of black holes in deep mourning.’*

Tanya and Andrew arrived first, so we had a bit of a breathing space.

They tried to get in through the kitchen but Russell made them go around and knock on the front door. There was cousinly shouting. He dragged it open to the usual screeching fanfare, echoed by a small donkey in the stables.

‘I don’t believe any of this,’ said Andrew. ‘I swear this house gets more like Fred Karno’s Army every day.’

‘Good evening, Tanya,’ said Russell, ignoring him. ‘May I take your coat?’

She handed it over. She was wearing black. There was no hope for any of us.

‘What about my coat?’ said Andrew.

‘What about it?’ said Russell, steering Tanya into the living room.

I took his coat, feeling a little guilty that some twenty-four hours after he’d begged me to stick with it, I was contemplating divorcing his cousin.

The two of us lingered in the vestibule while Andrew examined the front door, claiming he couldn’t remember the last time it had opened. In fact, we spent so long that Russell came looking for us.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded, suspiciously.

‘Checking out the door,’ said Andrew, vaguely, peering at the hinges.

‘Why?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind,’ I said hastily, suspecting a cousinly contretemps brewing. ‘Let’s have a drink.’

‘Oh, Jenny.’

‘You keep saying that.’ However, before I could investigate his utterance any further, sweeping headlights announced the arrival of Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard.

‘They’re here,’ announced Russell, *Poltergeist* style. ‘Line up the troops. Wife – front and centre.’

They were charming. Uncle Richard always was, of course, in his own understated way. There was a suggestion of gritted teeth about Aunt Julia but you couldn’t fault her efforts.

They barely flinched at the shrieking front door but Marilyn’s response took them back more than a little.

‘Goodness me,’ said Aunt Julia. ‘What the – what on earth was that?’

‘Marilyn,’ explained Russell, not making things clear at all.

‘Our donkey,’ I said, hastily, before she could accuse him of keeping women in the stables against their will.

‘Our sick donkey,’ he added helpfully.

She made a huge effort at a tiny joke. ‘Then I think you have a problem, Russell. If she can do that now, what sort of noise will she be capable of when she’s recovered?’

Fortunately, before Russell could enquire if she’d had a few before she came out, Mrs Crisp took her coat and she was gently but firmly ushered into the living room.

She halted on the threshold and we braced ourselves, but she said, ‘Oh, Jenny, it’s charming.’

Right. So, obviously yesterday’s visit was to be wiped from everyone’s memory. On the other hand, it did look lovely. Gentle lighting hid many defects, the fire crackled merrily, the saggy sofas were comfortable, and all the books made us look respectable.

She turned to Russell. ‘No offence, Russell, but I fancy much of the credit for this goes to Jenny?’

Behind me, Andrew muttered, ‘Who is she and what has she done with the real Julia?’ and I was inclined to agree.

What had brought about this transformation was anyone’s guess. Perhaps even she realised that yesterday’s visit had crossed a line. Perhaps she was unwilling to relinquish visiting rights. Whatever it was, she smilingly insisted that of course she remembered Andrew and Tanya, accepted a drink from Russell, and reminded Uncle Richard they’d brought wine as a gift for the evening.

I think Russell was a little miffed, feeling perhaps that his own choice was being disparaged, but he took in the spirit it was meant and Mrs Crisp bore it away.

We had a few minutes’ small talk. The weather was closely examined and

found to be appropriate for the time of year. Andrew's function was politely ascertained and not found wanting. Uncle Richard informed the breathless company that he and Miss Bauer were professionally acquainted, albeit only slightly, and before we had time to run out of things to say to each other, Mrs Crisp, under instructions from Russell to move things along as quickly as possible, announced that dinner was served.

Mrs Crisp and I had not messed about with the table arrangements. Russell, at the head of the table, was flanked by Aunt Julia on one side and Tanya on the other, on the grounds that his legendary women-handling skills would see him through and the whole damn thing was his fault anyway. He accepted with good grace, contenting himself with twinkling at me as I seated Uncle Richard and Andrew with me at the other end. Russell opened the wine, Mrs Crisp brought in the first course, and away we went.

'Oh, this looks delicious,' said Uncle Richard appreciatively, gazing at Mrs Crisp's seafood salad, which did indeed look lovely. Further up the table I could hear Aunt Julia saying the same.

Russell topped up her wine glass.

Uncle Richard peered closely. 'Jenny, my dear, which sauce would you like?'

'Mayonnaise please, Uncle Richard.'

We all served each other and got stuck in. Mrs Crisp retired anxiously to the door, but she was worrying unnecessarily. It was delicious. I looked up to see Russell give her a small smile and the thumbs-up. She melted away.

We chatted away at our end. Andrew was a Checkland and therefore never short of a word or two, and Uncle Richard, after an anxious glance towards the head of the table for approval, happily joined in.

He needn't have worried. Russell was opening another bottle of wine and they were going at it full throttle. Even as I watched, she laid a hand on his arm and laughed. He didn't even flinch.

Uncle Richard blinked a little, and then turned back to me and said in a conspiratorial whisper, 'What do you think, my dear. Shall we ...?' and he poured me half a glass of wine, an action that would normally have led to our instant annihilation. He topped up his own and said, 'What about you, Andrew?'

'Designated driver,' he said with regret. 'And I'm on call, too.'

'Oh, what a shame.' 'He threw another disbelieving glance at his wife. 'It's just you and me then, Jenny.' I sipped away. Sadly, wine tastes like furniture polish to me, but I was happy to be included and smiled benignly upon my guests.

Sharon and Kevin cleared the table and disappeared. I waited a little anxiously for any sounds of breaking crockery but quite honestly, I don't think I would have heard them over the increasing noise levels at the other end. Russell was telling a story, waving his arms about, and Aunt Julia was smiling at him. As I stared, Tanya turned and said, 'Good party, Jenny.'

‘Thank you,’ I said, pleased and relieved it was going so well.

‘Chicken with white wine sauce and grapes,’ murmured Mrs Crisp, ‘Served with baby vegetables and new potatoes.’

‘Oh my,’ said Aunt Julia. ‘You certainly know how to look after your guests, Russell.’

‘My wife chose the menu,’ he said, still smiling but leaving no one in any doubt that hostilities could break out at any time he wanted them to. His hair was flopping over one eye and they were opening yet another bottle of wine. I couldn’t take my eyes off them.

Tanya flashed me a quick smile then turned her attention back to Russell. I felt a small relief. They’d split the duties between them. Andrew was designated driver. She was on Russell-watch. I wasn’t sure which of them had drawn the short straw.

Uncle Richard and Andrew got on like a house on fire. We talked about donkeys – because if you’ve got one they tend to dominate the conversation – the latest James Bond film, the proposed pedestrianisation in Rushford, football, wine, and all points in between. We were laughing so hard over Andrew’s story of Mrs Aldershot’s Yorkie’s attempt at family relations with Mr Fitterton’s Staffie and the subsequent medical attention required by both dogs and their owners that when Kevin upset the water jug, it wasn’t the embarrassing disaster it might have been.

Uncle Richard lifted the wine glasses out of the way, Andrew moved the plates, I mopped, and we replaced everything with barely a break in the by-now-quiete-loud conversation.

Kevin fled in shame, but Sharon’s hazelnut tarts were a triumph and we ended on a high.

Everyone was having too good a time to move so we had coffee at the table and a substantial amount of brandy went round as well.

I think I was beginning to sway slightly when Mrs Crisp put a very welcome glass of water in front of me and Uncle Richard, casting a glance at Aunt Julia, announced they should probably be going.

She seemed quite reluctant, despite having missed her ten o’clock bedtime, but eventually moved slowly and majestically to the door.

‘Stately Spanish Galleon,’ whispered Andrew behind me and I giggled. Russell shot me a very strange look I didn’t understand at all, although actually, things were a bit blurry ...

‘Oh, Jenny,’ said Thomas, in some amusement.

... and I realised very suddenly that although I’d quite enjoyed the wine, a substantial amount was about to make the return trip.

I didn’t know what to do. They wouldn’t go. Just standing. Talking. Go, will you. Oh God, I felt bad. I was never drinking again.

‘You’ve never drunk before,’ said Thomas.

‘Not helping,’ I said.

Russell saved me. Turning to say something, he fixed me with an

experienced and not unsympathetic stare and said, 'Don't come out into the cold, Jenny. I'll see our guests out.'

'Thank you,' I said, suddenly liking him better than I ever had before, and fled for the stairs.

There was no time to get to my room. The family bathroom was the first door at the top of the stairs and I barely made it. I dumped a substantial amount of the evening meal in the nearest receptacle – the bath – decided I'd never drink again, or eat either, and waited for everything to subside.

It didn't. If anything, I felt worse. My stomach cramped painfully and off I went again. And again. And again.

Where was it all coming from? I didn't remember carrots. My head pounded. I couldn't see properly. I shivered, shook and hoped I would die before anyone found me.

I was vaguely aware of cars starting and driving away. The door screeched. I heard voices and then a familiar step on the staircase.

He knocked. I told him to go away but in shorter sharper words. He came in anyway. He seemed inappropriately cheerful about my death throes.

'Don't panic, Jenny, you're not the first Checkland to occupy that exact spot. The number of times I've been there. And Andrew, back in his day. And, if you'd been able to stomach me for a little longer, and we'd had offspring, I daresay they would have carried on the proud family tradition, too.'

I wouldn't be surprised if he could speak and vomit simultaneously. I cast him a look of loathing and proceeded to bring up everything I'd eaten in the last six months.

'Poor old Jenny,' he said, kneeling beside me and rubbing my back gently. 'Shall I go away?'

Tears of mortification ran down my cheeks. I looked at the author of all my misfortunes and consigned him to the lowest circles of hell.

'No, please stay.'

'Of course I will. I'll get you some water and then we'll get you to bed.'

But we didn't.

It went on all night. The slightest sip of water came back tenfold. I grew exhausted and still it didn't stop. I lay on the bathroom floor and rested my hot face against the cool tiles, shivering with cold. Russell fetched a blanket and I threw up on that as well. Finally, just a little before dawn, the cramps eased. An uneventful half hour went by.

'I'm going to carry you to bed now. If you throw up on me, I shall call Andrew and have you put down.'

I nodded and he picked me up, blanket and all and carried me to my room. He placed me gently on the bed and went back for the basins, towels, flannels, glasses of water, and all the other paraphernalia I'd accumulated.

'Close your eyes, Jenny,' murmured Thomas, who'd never wavered, even during the really unpleasant bits. '*Try and sleep.*'

I never thought I would, but I did. I was exhausted. It was broad daylight when I woke, still wrapped in my crusty blanket.

‘Gently. Don’t try and sit up in case you set yourself off again.’

‘This is your fault.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Too late for that.’

‘No, I mean, how is this my fault?’

‘If you hadn’t stopped me killing myself all those years ago I wouldn’t be here now.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘Tired.’

I found my arms, got them free of the blanket, and reached for the glass of water on the bedside cabinet.

‘I wouldn’t drink that, Jenny. Just in case. Mrs Crisp will bring some fresh.’

And indeed, at that moment, she knocked and entered. She looked dreadful. Worse than I’ve ever seen anyone look.

‘In that case, you might want to avert your eyes when you clean your teeth,’ said Thomas.

‘Oh, you’re awake at last,’ she said. ‘How are you feeling? Let me help you sit up.’

I pulled myself up and she plumped the pillows behind me. And yes, she had brought fresh water.

‘Just one or two sips, dear. No more. I’ll go and tell Russell.’

I lay back and took stock. I’d vomited copiously all night. I’d slept in my clothes and make-up. Well, if nothing else, once he clapped eyes on me he’d be a great deal more reconciled to our divorce. It might even be all over by next Monday. If I lived that long.

He appeared in the doorway. ‘Still alive, then?’

I shook my head very gently and felt a familiar sensation. I grabbed the bowl, but it subsided. It had to. There really couldn’t be anything left.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said, coming into the room. ‘Dry-heaving is no fun. Take it from an expert. If I run you a bath, do you think it would help?’

I nodded. A bath sounded wonderful. To be clean again.

‘And,’ he said, ‘I’ve sent for your doctor so you need to get cleaned up or he’ll never recognise you.’

‘No!’ I croaked.

‘Too late,’ he said, and went into the bathroom. I could hear the sound of running water. He reappeared.

‘I don’t know which is your favourite bath lotion – I’ve never seen so many – but I’ve chucked a few into the mix. You’re not very fragrant, my love.’

I blushed red with mortification again.

‘Up you come,’ he said, lifting me again. He managed the steps down, no problem at all, and set me gently on my feet. He unwrapped the blanket and unzipped my dress.

I made a small sound.

‘Stop panicking,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Just making things easier for you. Don’t start undressing yet, I’m coming back with your PJs.’

He was back seconds later. ‘Seriously? Shaun the Sheep pyjamas?’

Kill me now.

He turned off the taps and tested the water. ‘That’s fine. I’ll leave you now. Don’t fall asleep and don’t drown or I’ll get the blame. Back in half an hour.’

Then he was gone, leaving the usual vacuum in his wake.

I undressed very slowly, dropping everything in the bin. I never wanted to see any of it again. How people managed to get drunk regularly was a mystery to me. Or why they would want to. I was only ever drinking water from now on. If I wanted to be frivolously irresponsible and let rip, then I’d put a slice of lemon in it.

I lay back in the warm, heavily scented water and closed my eyes.

‘*Don’t go to sleep,*’ said Thomas, anxiously.

I washed my face clean, then my hair, then the rest of me, feeling a little better with every passing moment.

Half an hour later I was bathed, teeth cleaned – ‘*Don’t look in the mirror. It won’t do you any good at all and it’s not as if you don’t know where your teeth are.*’ – and was sitting on my bed combing my hair. I’d had three sips of water and every single one had stayed put. Someone had put fresh sheets on the bed and I climbed in, exhausted, and fell asleep again, waking only when Mrs Crisp brought Dr Williams, who’d known me for ever.

‘Well, Jenny. Mrs Checkland, I should say. What have you been doing to yourself?’

I was looking at Mrs Crisp as he spoke and her face spoke volumes.

‘I think I ... drank too much,’ I said, as best I could.

‘And how much did you drink? One bottle? Two?’

‘One,’ I said. ‘Glass,’ and he chuckled.

‘Well, there are a number of possibilities here. You drank too much. You ate something that disagreed with you.’ Mrs Crisp closed her eyes. ‘Or you’ve got one of the many bugs flying around at this time of year. Let’s have a look, shall we?’

He began to do doctor things.

I reached out and pinched his hand. ‘I can’t have eaten anything ... bad,’ I said, carefully, cutting my eyes to Mrs Crisp. ‘We had a ... dinner party. Six of us. Everyone else is fine.’

He paused briefly and then said, ‘Well, that seems to dispose of that theory. And quite honestly, Jenny, Mrs Checkland, I don’t think one glass of wine would produce quite such – spectacular – results, so tummy bug it is. When did it start?’

He did all the usual medical things, wrote a prescription and asked Mrs Crisp to take it downstairs.

After she’d gone and he was packing things away, he said, ‘That was a kind

thought, Jenny, but unnecessary, I think. I've known Lizzie Crisp for years and seafood and chicken notwithstanding, she's incapable of producing bad food. And as you said, everyone else is fine. No, I think we'll go with the popular choice, the twenty-four-hour tummy bug. Take things easy for a day or so. Sip water. Eat a little toast when you feel like it. I know you think you'll never eat again, but you will, believe me.'

'Thank you. Please don't mention this to my aunt.'

'Wouldn't dream of it. You'll do fine here, Jenny. Plenty of people to look after you, but if it starts up again, let me know immediately and I'll come straight back.'

Something occurred to me. I'd never had to think about this sort of thing before. 'Am I a private patient?'

'One of my favourites, so look after yourself. You might want to approach wine with more caution, next time. Goodbye, Mrs Checkland.'

He closed the door behind him.

I did nothing for two days. On the third day, I rose again, dressed carefully, and trailed down the stairs, with Thomas chirping anxiously every inch of the way.

'*For heaven's sake be careful on the stairs,*' he muttered, as if I'd forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other. To please him, I inched my way forwards with the speed of a striking glacier. People grew old in the time it took me to make my way downstairs.

In the kitchen, I was given the warm seat by the stove, a cup of tea, and an inquisition into my state of health.

'Still alive then?' said Russell.

I glanced down at myself, just to check, and nodded.

'You poor old thing,' he said, with easy, if not complimentary, sympathy. 'I'm taking Mrs C and Kevin into town this afternoon. Sharon will be here if you need anything. Are you OK with that?'

Actually, I thought a quiet afternoon not doing anything would be very pleasant.

I never learn.

Sharon was baking and pleased to have me around. She was trying out new ideas for cupcakes and I happily drank tea and lined trays with baking cases for her. When she'd finished, she chucked it all in the oven and slammed the door.

'Never be afraid,' she said, sensing my startled look. 'Slam the door and show them who's the boss.'

Someone knocked at the front door. An event so unusual that for a moment, no one knew quite what to do.

'*Well, open it,*' said Thomas, giving us a clue.

Sharon went out, returning a minute later, her face as white as her apron. 'It's a man, Mrs Checkland. He says he wants his donkey back or he's going to the police.'

I went straight into full-blown panic. I knew this would happen. I told Russell this would happen. You can't just go around stealing people's donkeys willy-nilly. I said the owner would turn up. And here he was. And where was our intrepid donkey-napper now the chips were down? If I knew anything, they'd all be in a pub somewhere, while I held the fort – and the donkey – and had to deal with incensed owners, the police, the legal system, and Aunt Julia, because she'd find out about it somehow, if only when Uncle Richard had to try and keep me out of prison.

'Have you quite finished?' asked Thomas, amused.

'It's not funny. He'll have to come back when Russell's here.'

Sharon was waiting. *'He's really angry. Says if you don't hand her over he'll go and get her himself.'*

Oh, my God, what was I going to do? Where the hell was Russell?

'Oh, he won't be back for hours,' said Thomas, unhelpfully. *'It's all up to you Jenny. There's no one else.'*

'I can't do it alone.'

'You're not alone. Now come on, straighten your hair and go and kick his ass. Not literally. Actually, that was quite funny.'

'Thomas ...'

'I mean it, Jenny. Stop being so pathetic and save your donkey. You don't want him to get her back, do you?'

'You're beginning to annoy me.'

'Excellent. Now – get in there.'

'This is something else we'll be talking about later.'

But it had worked. He'd focused me on the problem, which was preventing Marilyn from being taken away. And Russell would get me out of prison. Somehow.

'Gelignite?'

I said to Sharon, *'I'll see him in the living room.'*

She nodded. *'Do you want me to stay?'*

'No. Please nip out and ... make ... sure she's safely locked up.'

I stood by the fireplace, smoothed my hair and clothes, and indicated she should bring him in.

She was right. He was horrible. He was big and loud and he thrust his belly into the room before him like a heat-seeking missile. I hoped the dismay I felt was not written all over my face, although I doubted it. He peered around the room, instantly assessing the value of everything in it, including me. The window looked out into the garden, so it was only a guess, but I could imagine him arriving in some clapped-out old Jag with an expired tax disc.

He moved into the centre of the room, the dominant position, and embarked upon some diatribe in which his rights, our wrongs, damage to property, theft, Marilyn's value, and his surprisingly large and completely unsuspected affection for her jostled for my attention.

Not knowing what to do or say, I let him go on. And on. And on. Even

when he showed signs of slowing down and offered me the opportunity to speak, I said nothing. He began to repeat himself. I still said nothing and used the time to think. Eventually, he talked himself to a standstill, very red in the face and not best pleased by the lack of opposition.

Finally, I said, 'Well?' hoping for another long monologue, during which, with a bit of luck, the cavalry would drag themselves out of the pub and rescue me.

'I've come for the donkey you stole and compensation for the damage you did, or I'll have the law on you.'

Two weeks ago, I would have been terrified by such a threat but even a short time with Russell Checkland had eroded my morals to such an extent that, scared though I was, I had no thought of handing over Marilyn. And certainly not to this great bully of a man who would punch and kick a little donkey without compunction and snap her little legs like a twig.

Besides, I thought I had an enormous golden horse on my side, who several times in my life, and especially at school, had effortlessly enabled me to face down physical confrontation.

I drew my ragged banner of courage around me and said, 'Of course.'

From behind the kitchen door, Sharon gasped.

I crossed to the table and rummaged in the heap that was Russell ('I know where everything is') Checkland's filing system.

'You'll need this.' I handed him Andrew's meticulously detailed and colossal bill.

'And this.' I handed him the feed bill.

'And this.' I handed him the farrier's bill.

'And this.' I handed him Uncle Richard's business card.

'And this.' I handed him Tanya's firm's business card, thus ruthlessly committing two of the most prestigious law firms in town to the defence of a small donkey with the lung capacity of the Mersey Tunnel.

'What's all this?' he demanded, angrily, but after my brief burst of eloquence, I'd reverted to my natural state. Partly to recharge but mostly because I could see it baffled and annoyed him. He'd come expecting a shouting match, during which he would easily dominate me and frighten me into giving him a large sum of money to go away. Well, it wasn't going to happen. I had a feeling I could see my way out of this.

'Invoices,' I said, although he could see that for himself.

'Plus,' I rummaged artistically again. He stepped back and that was all I needed to know. I flapped miscellaneous bits of paper. 'Paperwork from the council relating to the removal of the other dead donkeys. Report from the RSPCA pending prosecution. Request from the police anxious to contact you ...' I let it tail away.

He threw the bills at me and followed them, standing right in my face. Looming. Thinking I had Thomas, I stood my ground.

'Don't give me any of that crap, lady. You stole my donkey and that's an

end to it. Now I'm guessing a bleeding heart like you won't want to give her back so you just give me her price, the value of the gate, something for my expenses and trouble coming here today, and we'll say no more about it. A nice lady like you won't want to see her name in the papers and I'm guessing those relatives of yours will pay a lot to keep it out as well.'

I couldn't shout and bluster like he did. It wouldn't work. I couldn't bludgeon him with words and sarcasm like Russell. I had to develop my own defence.

Once again, I allowed him to run down. When he appeared to have finished, I said, 'Whatever,' and turned away as if I'd lost interest.

I could actually feel him swell with wrath. Perhaps winding up a potentially violent bully was not such a good idea. I moved away as casually as I could. He wasn't going to involve the police. He didn't want Marilyn back. He just wanted money. He'd heard we'd suddenly acquired a donkey – you can't hide Marilyn, except two miles underground, maybe – done his research, and picked on me as the weakest link. Which I was, but I was really fed up with people thinking so. Unaccustomed rage clouded more than my judgement.

'You pathetic weasel! Do you really think I'm afraid of a bag of piss and wind like you? There is no way I'm handing her back to you, so take that great belly and your stupid, fat, purple face and just fuck off out of it, will you? Preferably before my husband gets back because you might think I'm a cow, but he's a total bastard and these days he's just looking for some low-life scum to give a good kicking. To.'

I got a bit confused with the grammar there.

He stepped back in surprise. I should have followed up my advantage, but I had nothing left. He came at me again, angry at having given ground and raised his hand.

Shit! Thomas, where are you?

The kitchen door crashed open and Sharon surged magnificently into the room, clutching one of Mrs Crisp's cherished Le Creuset frying pans. Something that could easily kill if wielded in anger.

'I've called the police,' she shouted.

Why hadn't I thought of that?

'Get out. Now.'

I grabbed some hideous vase and brandished it menacingly and I really don't know what would have happened next, but at that moment, everyone heard Russell's Land Rover clattering into the yard.

Sharon lowered her potentially fatal frying pan. 'Mr Checkland is back. I'm sure he'd love to meet you. Would you like to stay for tea?'

He was already heading towards the door. I could hear Russell shouting in the kitchen, shouting for me, Sharon, anyone, what was going on?

Bully boy was struggling with the front door, which in true Checkland style, was not performing as expected.

Both Sharon and I were still clutching our weapons as Russell entered and

took in the scene at a glance.

With a jerk of his head, he indicated we were both to leave. Now.

We did.

The last I saw and heard was Russell advancing to the front door and saying gently, 'Can I be of any assistance?'

Thomas was already in the kitchen.

'Where were you?'

'I was with Marilyn, keeping her quiet.'

'Why?'

'Well, she was upset.'

'She was upset? I've just faced down that man and you weren't there?'

'Yes, the important part of that sentence was "I've just faced down that man" ...'

'No, the important part of that sentence was, "You weren't there." I was all prepared to wallop him with that hideous purple thing and Sharon was there with the Le Creuset and where were you? Oh, yes, in the stables with Marilyn who was in no danger at all.'

'Well, she didn't know that. She was most distressed, poor thing.'

'And so was I.'

'No, you weren't. Once you got into your stride, you were well away. Actually, Jenny, I think you might be turning into a bit of an adrenaline junkie. You might want to watch yourself.'

Before my adrenaline had time to spike even further, Russell came back into the kitchen, looking very pleased with himself.

He put his arm around Sharon, saying, 'You were wonderful. There'll be a little something extra in your pay packet this week with my compliments and best wishes.'

Now was the moment for Mrs Crisp to snort and say she would be lucky if there was anything in her pay packet at all, let alone a little extra, but, unaccountably, she said nothing. She was unpacking her shopping and putting things away quietly, not meeting anyone's eye. I would have liked a little time to think about this, but Russell grasped my wrist and pulled me into the chilly dining room.

'What were you thinking?' he demanded.

Great. Sharon gets a bonus and I get a bollocking.

'Why didn't you just tell him to go away?'

By now, reaction was setting in. And I remembered I'd just had one of those twenty-four-hour bug things.

I kicked him.

'Ow! What the hell ...'

'I was frightened. I didn't know what to do. And you weren't here.' Which, as far as I was concerned, was the crux of the matter. 'And he shouted. And he had horrible breath. And you weren't here.'

He stopped dead and put his arms around me. 'I'm here now.'

I really should have struggled or at least put up some sort of resistance. Instead, I leaned against him and buried my face in his jacket. He smelled of after-shave, fabric conditioner, and soap.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, again. ‘I’m here now.’

I sniffed a couple of times.

‘I really should try and take better care of you, shouldn’t I?’

I nodded.

‘Tomorrow. No, not tomorrow, I have to see someone. The day after tomorrow. We’ll go into town, have a nice lunch, and go to the art shop. How does that sound?’

‘Actually, it sounds very unlikely. On your form to date, we’ll set off for Rushford and be attacked by a ... dragon which you will immediately bring home and we’ll be followed by the dragon’s owners, the three witches who will demand a large sum of money or they’ll turn us into toads and you’ll be in the ... pub.’

He was laughing. ‘Jenny, when you’re wound up you really are a delight.’ He bent his head and kissed me very lightly, which I think surprised both of us.

He cleared his throat. ‘Shall we go and have a cup of tea?’

Good idea.

‘I’m out all day today,’ said Russell, finishing his breakfast the next morning, and getting to his feet. ‘All of you, just try and stay out of trouble while I’m gone. Jenny, you’ve got my number, but trust me, he won’t be back. Ever.’

He slammed the door on his way out. Kevin, who had made his tea last as long as possible so he could look at Sharon, wrung the last few drops from his mug and disappeared too. Sharon smiled blindingly, collected the Hoover, and could be heard crashing about in the dining room.

‘*So, just you and Mrs Crisp*, said Thomas, stating the obvious.

I sipped my cup of tea very carefully, but everything seemed stable. She handed me a plate of delicate toast fingers. She’d even cut the crusts off. For some reason it brought a lump to my throat.

I nodded my thanks and nibbled carefully. She finished what she was doing, folded her tea towel and said, ‘I wonder if I might have a word with you, Mrs Checkland.’ My heart sank.

She slid an envelope across the table to me.

‘My resignation.’

I pushed it back again and shook my head. I didn’t know what to say so I said nothing, feeling my way.

‘I don’t think you understand,’ she said, twisting her fingers together. ‘You see ... I think what happened to you ... your sickness ... might be my fault.’

I shook my head again, but she was determined.

‘*Let her say it.*’

‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but sometimes I have ... a little something in the afternoons because sometimes, when I get a little anxious, it’s helpful. I

swear to you it's never been a problem ... it just helps me get through the day ... but I wondered if ... because I was nervous about the dinner ... although I didn't think I drank so much, but of course not knowing is a sign that there is a problem, and so ... I mean, seafood and chicken, what was I thinking?

She sat at the table head bowed, her fingers working, crying quietly.

'I always said I would go when Russell married. You know, new broom and all that, except I thought it would be that red-headed –' She remembered suddenly that Francesca was my cousin.

I'd never felt so helpless. I wanted to make some long eloquent speech that would put everything right. To do something to ease her obvious unhappiness, but there was a log-jam of words and because it was important, vital even, that I say something, nothing happened.

I took her hand, concentrated on the pattern in the tablecloth, and said, 'No.'

'I don't think you understand ...'

'No.'

'No, really, Mrs Checkland – you don't understand.'

There's more to this than meets the eye, ' said Thomas. *'I'd just hang on a minute, if I were you.'*

She wiped her eyes on her tea towel, an action that would have brought instant death to anyone else and continued, 'I drink, you see.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Not a lot, but more than enough.'

I nodded again.

She looked around, but Sharon had moved upstairs and Kevin was still in the yard. Not looking at me, she drew herself up and said firmly, 'I suspect, Mrs Checkland, that your recent illness was due to carelessness on my part and therefore, I beg you to accept my resignation.'

Something more was called for than just saying: 'No.' I focused on the pattern again, blue and cream, interwoven, took a breath and then another.

'Dr Williams said it was a twenty-four-hour bug. He said it wasn't the food. No one else is ... sick. You cannot leave Russell. He'd be heart-broken. You raised him. Nobody can remember a ... time when you weren't here. You mustn't go. You're needed here. This is your home.'

'Not bad. Not bad at all.'

She shook her head. 'I should have gone years ago. Years and years ago.'

I was mystified. 'Why?'

She looked round again. I could hear Sharon coming back. I got up and went out.

'... Can you give Kevin a hand for half an hour or so?' This seemed a good way of getting rid of her.

'Neat,' said Thomas.

'Thank you.'

‘This next bit is not going to be good, though.’

‘No.’

Back in the kitchen, she hadn’t moved.

I sat down again and waited.

Hesitantly, folding and re-folding the tea towel, she began.

‘I think in everyone’s life there’s always something they wish they’d done. Or hadn’t done.’ She looked at me and continued with difficulty. ‘I did something. It was wrong. It was very wrong. I knew when I did it that it was wrong, but I was so – alone – and just for a few hours, the world went away and ... But it was wrong. So that was something else I had to forget. So I started taking a drink at night, just to help me to sleep and well, you can guess the rest.’

She looked terrible. The weight of her past must be almost unbearable. She was in her – what – late fifties? Did Russell know what was going on here?

‘Hard to say,’ said Thomas. *‘He’s uncomfortably perceptive in some areas and a complete idiot in others. I’m guessing this is one of his idiot areas.’*

With no idea what to do, I took her hand. She squeezed it and then pushed it away from her.

‘I’ll tell you,’ she said with sudden decision. ‘I’ll tell you and then you’ll see why I have to go.’

‘You don’t have to,’ I said, panicking. ‘Don’t tell me if you don’t want to.’

But she’d made up her mind. I don’t think she was even listening to me. She sat up in her chair, squared her shoulders, and put her chin in the air.

‘I killed her. I killed Russell’s mother.’

Chapter Nine

Long, long seconds passed. I should do something. I should say something. The longer the silence lasted, the worse things would get. Neither of us was capable of speech. Thomas moved around to stand beside her, breathing gently into her hair. Calming and soothing.

I swallowed once or twice, and then, since she was still sobbing into her tea towel, got up and switched the kettle on. My legs felt wobbly. I was really out of my depth. Again. My first thoughts were to leave this for Russell to deal with, but that wouldn't be a good idea.

'Good thinking. Let's see what she has to say first. She might just be referring to another catering accident.'

'Russell's mother died in a car crash, Thomas.'

'Well, I can't see her under the chassis tampering with the brakes, can you? Let's listen and then decide what to do.'

I put a mug of tea in front of her, removed the tea towel, and substituted the kitchen roll.

We looked at each other for a while and then she began.

'Dr Williams ... haven't seen him in a long time. Did he call me Lizzie Crisp?'

I nodded.

'That was my business name.' She smiled back into her past. 'I'll start at the beginning.' She seemed quite calm now. Determined too. I cuddled my tea in both hands and listened.

'Grahame and I met at junior school. We knew, both of us, almost from the moment we met. There was never anyone else. Childhood sweethearts.'

She smiled again, but it was a sad and bitter smile this time.

'He was a mechanic – and a good one. He worked for a while in his uncle's garage and then set up on his own. He did well, but he was always busy so I looked around for something to do.

'I liked cooking. I was good at it, so when a friend asked me to cook for her dinner party I was thrilled. It was a success. Word got round. From being just something to keep me occupied, it went to being a neat little business. Grahame was happy, I was happy. Everything was going so well.'

She drank some more tea. I was beginning to have a horrible feeling. I'd wanted a life. I'd wanted the sort of life real people have. We should be careful what we wish for. Suddenly, I wanted to be back in my attic where I wouldn't have to hear what happened to happy Lizzie Crisp and her childhood sweetheart Grahame.

She continued. 'And when Alice was born, it was just the icing on the cake. She was beautiful. I dressed her in blue to match her eyes.'

She lost herself for a while and we waited patiently.

‘Grahame’s dad found us some premises where I could cook and there was a small shop-front as well. People could either select from the freezer and take it home, or bring in their own dishes, I’d fill them up, and they could pretend they’d cooked it themselves.

‘It went really well. Grahame was busy too. I really thought it was going to be a case of “and they all lived happily ever after”. Well, some of us did – live, I mean. But there was no happily ever after for anyone. There never is, really, is there?’

‘Don’t answer that.’

‘It was summer. I was hot, tired, and getting behind. Grahame finished work, collected Alice from play-school, and arrived to pick up the deliveries. I can still remember. There was a buffet meal for the Summers family – they were having a do in their garden to celebrate their daughter’s exam results. There was a cake ... And Beef Wellington and poached pears for the Elliots. They were a nice couple.’

She sighed. ‘I was running around like a maniac. Everything was laid out ready on the counter. He loaded the car and, seeing I was busy, he said he’d take Alice who would enjoy the drive. I said yes, over my shoulder. I didn’t even spare the time to look at the pair of them. When the police asked me what they’d been wearing, I couldn’t tell them.’

I tensed my muscles to get up and run away.

‘You have to be strong now, Jenny. Strong enough for two people. You can do it.’

‘There was an accident. At the crossroads. They’ve got lights there now. Too late, of course. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just happened. The other driver was only a young boy. Quite sober, on his way back from the college. He burned himself badly trying to get ... to get them out. He couldn’t of course. His parents sent him up to Scotland afterwards. I think he’s still there. I expect he has his own family, now ...’

She trailed away and looked around the kitchen. I hoped to God she wasn’t looking for a bottle because I really wouldn’t know what to do then.

‘I wound up the business and for a long time I did nothing. I found a little nip of something before bedtime was – helpful.

‘Anyway, a little while later, Louisa, Russell’s mother, came to see me. We’d been at the same school. She was in the year above me, but I knew her slightly. She offered me the job here. Housekeeper, she called it, but really, it was a bit of everything. My family – and Grahame’s – urged me to take it, so I did. And to begin with, I didn’t regret it at all.’

‘Oh dear,’ sighed Thomas, who could see what was coming.

‘What?’ I said, because I couldn’t.

‘Shh!’ he said, as she picked up the tale again.

‘Louisa was lovely, of course. Gay – in the original sense of the word – charming, outrageous, demanding, loveable, selfish. Russell is her duplicate, even down to the hair. She whirled around the place, leaving chaos in her

wake. I didn't mind at all.

'Russell's father – I don't know what you've heard, but I had a good deal of sympathy for him. Even back then, things weren't going well and there he was, trying to hold it all together, while Louisa – well, you know how Russell can be ...'

I nodded. We all knew how Russell could be.

'The arguments started. Each side became more – polarised. It wasn't a happy house. And I was struggling, myself. And then, one night, Louisa and Russell were away, and we had a drink, and then another ...'

She trailed away again. I tore off a piece of kitchen roll for her.

'I think afterwards we were both quite horrified. And ashamed. We just – carried on as if nothing had happened. Now I had several drinks every night.

'I never said anything to anyone. The rows between them got worse. Then one night, I heard their door slam. She raced through the kitchen, screaming, 'How could you, Jeremy?' She brushed straight past me, out into the yard, jumped into her car, and roared off down the lane.'

To take the bend too fast and kill herself.

Her voice was husky with tears and guilt.

'So you see, he must have told her in the heat of the moment and she went off in such a temper ... and that was another one who never came back.'

She was silent for a long time after that, looking back over her memories.

'I stayed on, mostly to look after young Russell. A couple of women came up from the village, but Russell's father shut down most of the house, so we didn't need them. And once or twice, because we were lonely and everyone needs comfort every now and then ...'

Of course they did. No one knew that better than I did. I had Thomas, but not everyone was that lucky.

She smiled at me. No, she didn't. She twisted her mouth bitterly. 'So, as you can see, Mrs Checkland ...'

I said slowly, to give myself time to think, 'Well, I can see how you ... might think you had something to do with her ... death, but I think you are mistaken.'

She drew back. 'No, you don't understand.'

I took a giant leap into the world of words.

'Yes, I think I do. You said she ... pushed past you in the kitchen. If Mr Checkland had told her, don't you think she would have had it out with you? Right there and then? I didn't know her, but I know Russell. No ... filter. She would have shouted, screamed, tried to claw your eyes out, or ... something. I don't think Mr Checkland ever spoke of you to his wife. I can see how you linked ... what you did ... to her death, but I think it was just a ... coincidence. I can see why you think her death was partly your fault, but I think you are mistaken. I think you are confusing fault with guilt.'

'Jenny,' said Thomas. '*Magnificent.*'

'And I think, because you are a ... careful and conscientious person, you

are inclined to be over-concerned about the dinner party. I was not ill enough to have food poisoning. The meal was delicious and everyone enjoyed it. You rose to the challenge and Russell was proud of you. Please try not to think so much about the past. Focus more on the credit you deserve for raising Russell to be so ...'

'Yes?' said Thomas.

'Russell,' I finished lamely, because my stomach hurt with all the words. She was sobbing buckets. I hadn't done any good at all.

'Wrong,' said Thomas. *'Just let her have a good cry and pour her another cup of tea.'*

And so I would have done, but at that moment, Aunt Julia turned up.

'Again? Is it some sort of punishment?'

Mrs Crisp bolted for her room.

'Do you think she believed you?'

'I don't know.'

'It wasn't a bug, was it?'

'No.'

'What are we going to do?'

I appreciated the 'we'. 'I don't know.'

He stared out of the window. *'Bet you're not bored now.'*

Aunt Julia brought flowers and a tasteful thank you note. She peered closely at me. 'Are you feeling well, Jenny? You don't look it.'

'I'm a little tired,' I said, taking advantage of my 'disability,' just for once. 'My life is quite busy at the moment.'

She didn't believe me. 'You're very pale. Are you sure you're feeling all right?'

'Yes. Thank you for the flowers. Would you like some tea?'

'Not stopping. Not stopping. Not stopping ...' intoned Thomas, an enthusiastic neuro-linguistic programmer.

'Thank you. That would be lovely.'

He snorted.

'I don't think you should be exposing a young foal like me to such language.'

I showed her into the living room, checked Russell hadn't left anything controversial on the table, and went back to make the tea.

'What are you doing?' she demanded, as I brought it in, together with a plate of second-best biscuits.

'Not the HobNobs,' Thomas had warned. Unnecessarily.

'Your tea, Aunt Julia.'

'Yes, I can see that, but why are you making it?'

'Because my housekeeper is prostrate with grief and guilt over having slept with my husband's father and thinks she may have got drunk and accidentally poisoned me,' is what I didn't say.

'Mrs Crisp's day off,' seemed a less controversial response.

Her silence spoke volumes about people who allowed their staff a day off. I poured. She sipped. We both ignored the biscuits. She because of her hips and me because I knew we had HobNobs hidden away.

The silence lengthened, but I knew she wouldn't let it go.

'Brace yourself.'

She put her cup down. 'Jenny, I'm sorry, say what you will, you don't look well to me. Are you going down with something?'

'Actually, I'm just getting over a bit of a bug.'

'Really – what sort?'

'Oh, just one of those twenty-four-hour things, although in my case it was gone in twelve. I'm fine now.'

'When was this?'

'Oh, not sure, really. It was nothing. Please don't be concerned'

'Well, I am concerned. You were never ill when you lived with us.'

'That's because you never went out anywhere.'

'Aunt Julia, really, I'm fine. And I was very well looked after.'

'By whom? Not – that woman? You're ill and she's taken the day off? It's not good enough.'

You see, this is what happens when you take to lying. Especially lying to Aunt Julia.

She was off again. 'And where is Russell?' She looked around as if he was about to materialise in a corner somewhere. Being Russell, and never around when he was needed, he didn't.

I wasn't going to admit I didn't know where he was. I'd never thought to ask. I really didn't have the hang of being a wife at all.

'Umm ...'

She turned back to me, mouth tight. I knew the signs.

'Let me get some more hot water,' and I was out of the door and into the relative safety of the kitchen.

Mrs Crisp was there, looking very normal.

'Oh, Mrs Checkland, you go back in to Mrs Kingdom. I'll bring the water through.'

I was sick of being a considerate employer. 'Don't you dare. I've told her it's your day off. Go back to your room and ... don't even breathe loudly.'

Aunt Julia was wandering around looking at our books when I returned with the water. I wished I hadn't offered her a refill now. I was beginning to feel tired.

'Buck up, Buttercup.'

'You're really not much help at all, are you?'

'So, tell me about your "bug" What did the doctor say? You did call a doctor, didn't you?'

'Russell did.'

'Russell called the doctor? Well, I am surprised. Did you make him?'

'No. I didn't want him to.'

‘Why not?’

‘It was very minor. Nausea and a little bit of a chill. I was fine the next day. Have a biscuit.’

She didn’t even look at them. Russell had called her a Rottweiler, but terrier would have been more appropriate. She was not going to let his go.

‘You actually vomited for twelve hours? That can be serious. Was it something you ate?’

‘Absolutely not, Aunt Julia. It was a twenty-four-hour virus. People get them all the time. Especially at this time of year. And Russell and Mrs Crisp looked after me beautifully.’

Silence. She wasn’t done. I was losing ground with every sentence. She put down her cup and took my hand. ‘Jenny, this is serious. Please be truthful. When did this start?’

‘Couple of days,’ I mumbled.

‘Before or after your dinner party?’

‘Um ...’

‘I knew it!’ she exclaimed, sitting back. ‘It was that woman, wasn’t it? That wretched Crisp woman. The one who drinks. She didn’t clean the prawns or cook the chicken properly. God knows why Russell keeps her on. She’s always drunk. We’re lucky it was just you.’

‘What?’

‘What?’

‘No, no, no, I didn’t mean it that way, my dear. I meant, we could all have gone down with something dreadful, thanks to that stupid old woman, and it was fortunate, although not for you, of course, that only one of us was affected.’

She regarded her half-drunk tea with suspicion, even though I’d made it, and seemed to struggle with herself.

‘Jenny, listen. I know you think – well, I don’t know what you think these days – but I worry about you. You have so little experience of life and you’re such a quiet little thing, and you’re so far away from us now and every time I see you you’re tired or ill or you’ve sustained some sort of injury. You don’t see it, but I do. So does your uncle. Please, please – no, don’t say anything – please just listen. I know your uncle spoke to you and now I’d like to add my little bit. If anything ever – happens – that worries or alarms you, please, please, just one phone call and your uncle will come and make everything right again. Do you understand what I’m saying, my dear? We’re so worried about you.’

I’d never seen her so agitated.

‘Don’t answer me now, Jenny, but please think about what I’ve said. There. I’ve said it. Now I must be going. Thank you for the tea.’

She got up.

‘Well,’ said Thomas. ‘*That was – unexpected. And a little unsettling. Now, let’s get her off the premises before the young master gets back and there’s*

another free and frank exchange of views.'

Mrs Crisp reappeared again after Aunt Julia had gone.

'I heard what she said. About me. It's what everyone must be thinking ...'

'I'm not ... thinking it. Nor is Russell. And it's got ... nothing to do with anyone else.'

'Well, thank you for speaking up for me. I do appreciate your ...' Her face started to crinkle again. She sniffed. 'Russell ...'

'... Can't manage without you. You know that.'

She sighed.

So did I. This was going to be very hard work.

'If Russell knew about ... you know ... Do you think I should tell him?'

'No,' I said, as firmly as I could, 'No. It's ... done. Let it lie.'

She looked relieved.

I was slowing down with all this effort.

'And obviously ... no one's ever going to hear it from ... me.' I tried not to sound bitter. 'I don't ... know if you've ... noticed, Mrs Crisp, but I'm ... not a ... Gabby Gertie ... And I ... don't have anyone ... to ... gab ... to.'

She began to cry again. That set me off. We pulled ourselves together. Noses were blown.

As she re-tied her apron with trembling fingers, I felt a huge stab of sympathy for her. She kept the whole place going. She was certainly the centre of Russell's erratic orbit. She must feel she carried the world on her shoulders. No wonder she drank.

I couldn't do anything about her memories, but I could help her face her future with more confidence. Just a few last words.

'Please, Mrs Crisp. Don't leave us.'

That was it. I put my hand on hers and suddenly realised I didn't need words any more.

Mrs Crisp was obviously determined both of us should get back on the horse as soon as possible.

'Omelette,' she announced gesturing at eggs and another anxious-looking frying pan.

'Well ...' I said, trying not to sound terror-stricken.

'Watch me,' she said, cracking, whisking, pouring, cooking, and serving. 'There.'

I stared at the semi-circle of golden perfection on my plate.

'Now you, Mrs Checkland.'

I cracked, mopped, tried again, whisked, poured, sucked my burn, prodded when I should have stirred, tipped a mass of yellow-grey worms onto a plate, and tried not to cry with frustration.

'What can I smell?' asked Russell, coming into the kitchen.

'Omelette,' I said sadly.

He picked up a fork, ignored my protests and tucked in. He said nothing

until he'd finished, laid down the fork, and said, 'Delicious.'

My heart swelled with gratitude.

'You should marry that man.'

'Really?' I said to Russell. 'You think it was OK?'

'It was fine. A little more seasoning next time and it will be perfect. Can you do Shepherd's Pie?'

'For this I spent all those years at college,' muttered Mrs Crisp, cleaning things away. 'My slow roast lamb with garlic and rosemary is hailed across three continents and all he ever wants is Shepherd's Pie.'

After all that, and just when I thought nothing else could happen to me – it did.

We were all set to go into town – to pick up Russell's art stuff – when he announced a postponement.

'Sorry and all that, Jenny, but there's a problem with the feed bill. I'm going to have to sort it out with Charlie Daniels – God knows what he thinks he's playing at – before we run out completely and have to start feeding the staff to Marilyn to save ourselves. Mrs Crisp, don't worry, you'll be the last to go. But, I'll be finished by lunchtime, so we'll nip into Rushford then, have a spot of lunch, and then off to the shop. How does that sound?'

'Fine,' I said, wondering if this was a genuine problem or just an excuse.

'Oh, I think it's genuine. It's not really in his nature to run away from things, is it? He's more a "run full-tilt and argue them to death" kind of person, don't you think? Anyway, let's leave him to it and go for a walk.'

'Good idea,' I said, and it was. Spring was springing all over the place, with bright green leaves exploding everywhere and exuberant birds cartwheeling across the sky, yelling their heads off.

'Let's go the other way,' said Thomas, so, just for once, we walked down the lane towards the village. We turned at the bottom and began to skirt the inaccurately named Duck Pond.

'I've seen more duck down a coal mine,' muttered Thomas, but I was watching a group of boys bending over something – a sack? – on the ground, half in and half out of the water. One of them poked it with a stick and I thought I saw it move.

Before I knew it, I said, 'Hey!' and began to run.

One of them said, 'Quick,' and another one shouted, 'Come on,' and pulled his arm. I never saw which one of them did it, but the sack was suddenly sailing through the air to hit the water with a splash. It definitely moved again. There was something in it.

The boys scattered as I ran towards them, which was just as well because I had no idea what I would have done if they'd stood their ground. I ran splashily into the water, tripped over some branch hidden beneath the surface, fell forwards, caught my face on something, panicked and floundered in icy water that wasn't quite deep enough to swim in.

My clutching fingers caught a corner of the sack just as it disappeared

beneath the surface. Holding it high, I struggled back out again, tripping on unseen hazards, coughing and shaking because the water tasted awful and was freezing into the bargain. I dropped the sack on the ground and spat.

'Hope you haven't got cholera,' said Thomas.

'Where were you?'

'Making sure they didn't come back.'

'Oh. Thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

I began to pick at the knot with stiff, cold fingers.

Thomas shifted uneasily. *'I'm not sure ...'*

'I can't leave whatever it is in there.'

'No, of course not, but it could be anything, so be careful.'

I wasn't listening. There was no movement at all from the sack and I feared I was too late.

'There's a hole. Just rip it.'

I poked a finger through the hole to make it bigger, grasped the edges, tugged away, and whatever was in there stirred into sudden life.

'Look out,' said Thomas, but it was too late.

I fell back onto my bottom with shock. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting – a litter of cute puppies or kittens maybe, but that wasn't what I got. Now I was in real trouble. I had rescued THE CAT FROM HELL.

It was not happy. It was not happy at all.

It fought its way out of the hole I had made, accompanied by the worst smell of ammonia in the entire world. If it had had two eyes, they would have been blazing with fury. If it had had two ears they would have been laid back against its head as it crouched in full fighting mode, seeking what it might devour. If its fur hadn't been plastered to its skinny body it would have been bristling like a toilet brush on steroids, but despite not having any of that it still managed to give a very strong impression of stark, staring, incandescent rage.

'Jenny, get back', said Thomas from several yards away.

I always feel sorry for wet cats. They look like drowned rats, all their dignity stripped away, leaving them exposed and vulnerable. Not this one however. Vulnerable was not in its vocabulary. Which was rich and varied as it roared and spat its way up and down the musical scale, hurling challenges to the universe and everything in it.

'Jenny,' said Thomas, again.

'What are you doing all the way over there?'

'Protecting you.'

'By post?'

'I think you should move quietly away so he doesn't think you're a threat. All he probably wants to do is get away and lick himself clean.'

I looked down at my wet hands. There were faint traces of blood. *'I think he's hurt.'*

There was a slight pause.

'Jenny, the animal is unsafe and probably sick into the bargain. I forbid you to go anywhere near him.'

'But I think he's hurt. And he seems to be missing an awful lot of body parts.'

'Maybe, but they didn't just drop off in the last few minutes. You saved him, now come away before he attacks you.'

I didn't move. The cat and I looked at each other. He got up from battle-crouch and wobbled his way towards me.

'Look out – he's attacking.'

'What is the matter with you?'

'It's filthy and riddled with disease. Cats carry rabies, you know. And bovine TB. And anthrax.'

'No they don't.'

'I bet you this one does.'

'He's had a tough time,' I said, quietly, looking at the scars, the bald patches, the tattered ear. This was not a cat who curled up happily in front of the fire every night. I stretched out a hand.

'Are you insane? You could lose your arm.'

I was getting cross with him. He'd comforted Marilyn quickly enough and supported our efforts to steal her. Why not this cat?

'It's not the same thing at all. Now come back home and get out of those wet clothes.'

'Good idea,' I said, and gently stroked the cat, which produced a strange noise similar to Russell's Land Rover when he missed third gear.

'It's purring,' I said in delight.

'It's preparing to rip your throat out.'

'He likes me. I'm going to take him home.'

'Jenny, I forbid you ...'

That did it. What was the matter with him? Determined to get my own way, I reached out very carefully and said to the cat, 'I'm going to pick you up and put you inside my coat and then I'll give you some milk and something to eat.'

'What are you doing?'

'Well, if I tell him what's happening then he won't be scared. And I'm sorry if you don't like it, but I'm taking him home.'

'Russell won't like it.'

'Russell can ...'

'Yes?'

Unable to think of anything I could do that would threaten Russell in any way, I ignored him. The cat showed no fear, continuing his rusty metal noise, so I picked him up and set off for home, with Thomas muttering to himself every inch of the way.

'You're wasting your time,' I said, crossly. 'I'm not listening.'

I hoped Russell would still be yelling at Mr Daniels, but he was crossing the yard. Of course he was.

I said to the cat, 'This is Russell. He shouts a lot but he doesn't mean any harm so don't worry. I'm just going to cover you up now.'

'Now you're in trouble.'

What happened to 'we'?

'Jenny, what's happened?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're soaking wet and you've cut your cheek. I have to hand it to you, wife, I've only been gone half an hour. What's in the jacket?'

Well, he'd stolen a donkey and I'd backed him up. Now it was his turn. I went to pull back my jacket, but the cat beat me to it and poked out a head like an outraged periscope, took one look at Russell, laid back its stumpy ear and hissed, long and hard.

Russell took a step backwards.

'What the bloody hell is that?'

Off we went again.

'It's a cat.'

'Jenny, put down the jacket and step away.'

'No.' I tightened my grip.

'What?'

'I said no, Russell. I can't pull it out of the pond and then ... just leave it.'

'What pond?'

'The Duck Pond. Some boys threw him in.'

'What boys?'

'The boys who threw him into the pond.'

'And you pulled it out? You?'

'Yes.'

'Where were the boys while this was going on?'

'I don't know. I wasn't looking. I was in the pond.'

'There's blood on you. Did it bite you?'

'No, I fell over something.'

The cat spat at Russell again.

'What's the matter with it?'

'Nothing. It just doesn't like you.'

'Why the hell not?'

'Because I'm cold and wet, and my face hurts, and he's cold and wet and hurt and you're just standing there yelling at the pair of us and if I could spit then I would too.'

Mrs Crisp pushed past him. 'Russell, get out of the way. Come with me, Mrs Checkland. We'll get you both dried off and you can have a cup of tea and he can have some milk.'

'Mrs Crisp, you're not taking that disease-ridden object into my house,' he shouted after us.

I turned round. 'That's not very ... nice. I'm your wife.'

'I didn't mean you. You know I didn't mean you. Bloody hell, Jenny.'

'Nice one, Mrs Checkland.' said Mrs Crisp, quietly.

* * *

When I came back downstairs, warm and dry again, Mrs Crisp handed me a mug of tea and nodded towards the stove. The cat crouched on a towel, slurping noisily at a saucer of milk. He was not a neat lapper. Milk sprayed everywhere. Beside the milk sat an empty saucer, licked more than clean.

'Tinned salmon,' she said. 'He seemed to enjoy it.'

'Of course he bloody enjoyed it,' said Russell sitting at the kitchen table. 'Half an hour ago he was sinking to a watery death and now he's got the warmest spot in the house, gorged himself on a tin of Sainsbury's finest red salmon, and is now lapping the cream off the top of the milk. What's not to enjoy?'

If I thought that drying out would improve his looks then I was wrong. This was not a beautiful cat. He was bigger than I thought, but that might have been because his coat was drying out. He was longhaired so he'd gone fluffy. The bits I could see were a kind of rusty tabby. His tail was odd. Almost F shaped.

'It's been badly broken at one time,' said Russell. 'And he's covered in lumps, bumps, scars, and burns. This probably ranks as one of his better days. So, when he's finished, Mrs Crisp will show him out and we'll be on our way, Jenny. Get your coat.'

I looked at Mrs Crisp, who looked back at me.

Russell became aware of the silence.

'We're not keeping it. It's wild.'

'He. It's a he.'

'And yet another reason for not keeping it.'

'No, it's not,' said Mrs Crisp who had put on her glasses and done some peering. 'It's an ex-he. So he was someone's pet once, maybe.'

'Exactly,' said Russell. 'Some little kid is out there sobbing his heart out for his beloved pet. Jenny, how can you be so cruel? Or even worse, some dear old pensioner has lost his only companion and is even now sinking into the pits of despair and loneliness. And it's all your fault. Seriously, Jenny, if you want a cat I'll get you one, but believe me, you don't want this one. We'll take him to the cat shelter and someone will give him a nice home.'

'No they won't,' I said. 'He's not a pretty kitten so no one will want him. He'll sit in his cage and people won't even stop to look at him because he's not like the other cats and after a while they'll just put him down, because no one wants someone who's got something the matter with them.'

Thomas, who'd been very quiet all this time, blew gently in my hair.

At the other end of the room the cat was trying to purr and lap at the same time with disastrous results.

We left Mrs Crisp and Kevin fashioning a cat bed from a cardboard box, two cushions, and a towel. The way they were going at it there would be satellite TV and a split-level dining room as well.

Any anxieties I might have experienced about Russell's apparent reluctance to start painting again were dispelled immediately upon entering the shop. He gazed around for a moment and then plunged off towards the paints. This was his world and I realised, without rancour, that I was forgotten.

'Wow,' said Thomas, perennial shopping victim. '*This is better than the bucket shop. Look at all this stuff. Look at these colours. What's that smell? What's this for? Oh, this is so cool ...*' and he disappeared too. And they talk about women and shopping.

I amused myself wandering around, occasionally catching a glimpse of Russell at the end of an aisle or hearing an echo of his voice. After about half an hour, I drifted over to the cash point where an astonishing number of boxes and bags were assembled. He had bought half the shop, it seemed. I added a rather nice book of Vermeer reproductions to the pile and settled down to wait until such time as he would remember my existence. He would certainly remember me when it came to carrying this lot to the car. I found a stool, exchanged a sympathetic glance with the cashier and leafed through my book.

He reappeared eventually, trailing two more assistants; all of them festooned like Batman's utility belt.

'Hello, wife,' he said, cheerfully. 'Have you been waiting long?'

'Yes,' was the answer to that one but he looked so excited and happy I'd have to be a monster to say it.

I smiled and shook my head and they started to ring things up. Russell apparently out of habit and not realising he didn't have to do that now, started to haggle about the price. The manager, obviously knowing him of old and with a large part of his mind calculating his commission, responded with spirit and an energetic discussion ensued. The cashier reached under the counter and placidly sipped her tea. I continued to read my book.

Silence fell. A total had been agreed. I handed over my book and it was returned to me with a smile and the compliments of the shop and before Russell could bristle indignantly and demand to know why I got freebies when I hadn't actually spent a single penny, the total was rung up and we were done.

Thomas reappeared. '*Oh, there you are.*'

I said nothing.

He surveyed the mountain of boxes, cartons and bags. '*Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything?*'

I held up my book.

'*It took you an hour to buy a book?*'

We were interrupted by Russell, belatedly realising he would require assistance with getting this lot back to the car.

'Now then, Jenny. Most of this stuff is quite light. I'll take the heavier stuff,

but if we load you up carefully, there'll be no need for two trips. Hold out your arms.'

Light it may have been, but by the time he'd finished I could barely see where I was going.

'Are you all right behind that lot?' said Thomas.

'This is my own fault,' I said to him. 'I should have had the foresight to train you to pull a small cart.'

He was horrified. *'I don't pull carts.'*

'Why not? You're always telling me you're a horse.'

By this time, we were out on the pavement. Russell turned right and strode off. I followed as best I could. It wasn't far and the load wasn't heavy. I just couldn't see very well.

A man standing outside Boots put his phone away and asked, 'Do you want a hand, pet?'

'Oh, no, thank you. It's not far, but thank you.'

'Well, look at you,' said Thomas. *'Talking to strange men in the street. Who'd have thought?'*

'He,' I said, with emphasis, 'was being helpful.'

Russell materialised. 'What's going on? Was that man bothering you?'

'On the contrary,' I said. 'He offered to help.'

'Oh, did he?' said Russell, turning to glare at the fortunately just vacated spot where he'd been. 'Really, Jenny, I don't think ...'

But we never got to find out what he didn't think because with all the inevitability of an anvil dropped from a passing cloud, Aunt Julia was with us.

Chapter Ten

‘What on earth ...? Jenny? Is that you? What are you doing?’

Her tone of voice would lead anyone to believe he’d set me to work in a sugar plantation.

I think Russell had had enough.

‘Ah, Julia, the very person. I’m sorry to have to say this, but I really must take issue with some aspects of my wife’s upbringing. I’ve just had to reprimand her for speaking to strange men in the street – a very inappropriate action for a newly married woman, I think you’ll agree. Now you know me, I don’t like to criticise, but you’ve been remiss, Julia, very remiss indeed. However, no harm done, so we’ll say no more about it.’

I said, ‘Um ...’ but there was no chance.

Whatever promises of good behaviour she’d made to Uncle Richard went straight out of the window. Or down the road, in our case.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she gasped.

‘No, that’s all right, Julia. No need to be embarrassed. I’ve had a word with Jenny and she assures me it won’t happen again. Nice to see you but we must crack on.’

Francesca said, ‘Hello, Russell.’

I hadn’t seen her from behind the boxes.

‘Oh-oh.’

I wondered if there was anything in the boxes that would break if I started throwing them.

‘Don’t do that. You need to stay hidden. This might turn ugly. Right in the middle of the High Street, too. Let’s hope she won’t make a scene in public.’

Aunt Julia was forging on. ‘I remember that the last time I had occasion to reprimand you for mistreating your wife you very cleverly managed to throw the blame back at me for not giving you a chance to explain your actions properly. I would not care to make the same mistake again so perhaps you could enlighten me as to why Jenny appears to be weighed down with boxes that are obviously much too heavy for her, while you are not?’

He could have explained he’d dropped his off at the Rover and come back for mine. He could have shown her how light they were. He could have relieved me of my load. He didn’t do any of that. He made a big mistake.

‘I don’t have to explain my actions to you, Julia. Now, if you’ll excuse us ...’ He took my arm.

I noticed that Aunt Julia’s concern for my well-being had not led her so far as to relieve me of any of the despised boxes. Or even to say ‘hello’.

And bloody Francesca was here somewhere. I seriously considered flinging my boxes to the ground and walking off.

‘I wouldn’t,’ advised Thomas. *‘Those boxes are all that’s preventing this*

situation deteriorating into a public brawl.'

'Why?'

'Have you seen your face since this morning?'

'I'd forgotten all about it. It doesn't hurt at all.'

'You look like the poster child for battered wives. Hang on to those boxes whatever you do.'

I started to turn away. The car wasn't far. I'd leave them to it.

Then Francesca, bless her, put her elegantly shod foot right in it.

'Oh, Jenny, you do look funny with all those boxes.' Russell furiously grabbed the top three or four.

I could see again. There was Francesca. And Aunt Julia. And half of Rushford walking past very slowly so they could get an earful. And the other half staring into the nearest shop window, apparently enthralled by the display of surgical trusses, incontinence pads, and a special offer on stair-lifts.

But back to the current crisis.

Russell, grabbing the boxes, caught a glimpse of my face, closed his eyes briefly, and muttered, 'Shit.'

I had no sympathy. I'd been with him all afternoon and he'd only just remembered? He was on his own.

Aunt Julia, thank God, was temporarily speechless. I hoped by the time she'd regained her composure, she would realise the embarrassment of a public scene and content herself with telling tales to Uncle Richard.

Another pig soared majestically into the stratosphere.

'It's up to you, Jenny,' said Thomas. *'Deep breath, focus, and go.'*

I took a deep breath, focused, and went.

'It was an accident, Aunt Julia.'

'Another one?'

'He wasn't even there. I fell in the pond.'

'Not making things any better.'

'You fell in the pond? Which pond?'

'The Duck Pond. At the ... bottom of the lane. I was rescuing a cat.'

'Which cat?'

'The cat in the pond.'

'Why?'

Now I was baffled. 'What?'

'Why? Why were you rescuing the cat?'

'Because it was in the pond.' I thought I'd made that clear. I wish people would listen to me.

'You let your wife fall in a dirty pond?'

'I wasn't there. Believe me, Julia, I'm with you on this one and when you see the cat, you'll know why.'

'So you hit her because she saved a cat?'

'No! I mean I didn't hit her at all. I've never hit a woman in my life. Not even Francesca. It was the cat.'

‘Oh dear.’

‘You’re telling me the cat hit her?’

‘No one hit her. She fell over a tree.’

‘You said she fell in a pond. You need to get your story straight, Russell Checkland.’

‘The tree was in the pond.’

‘And where was this again? A mangrove swamp in Florida?’

I realised I’d started to shake. I’d never done that before.

‘Jenny?’ said Thomas, concerned.

I made a huge effort to get some control over my life.

‘It’s all ... right, Aunt Julia, we’ve just been ... sh –’

I couldn’t get any further. The word ‘shopping’ refused to budge.

I tried again. ‘Art stuff.’

‘Oh?’ said Francesca, sharply. ‘You’ve started painting again, Russell? You didn’t tell me.’

‘Nothing to do with you, Francesca. You walked out, remember? Left me high and dry.’

He’d gone very white. Any minute now, things would be said from which there was no going back.

‘I don’t need your permission to paint. Or your presence. In fact, I’m better off without you. Go and marry Daniel and stop making such a nuisance of yourself.’

She slapped him.

Without thinking, I tried to say, ‘Russell, I’d like to go home, please.’ I stood, desperately trying to get something out. My mouth worked – nothing happened. I was back in the school playground again. I began to dribble. Hot tears ran down my cheeks. I was rooted to the spot. I couldn’t move, or speak. I could hardly see. But I could smell ginger biscuits.

I tried to pluck Russell’s sleeve, but he and Francesca were too busy shouting at each other. Aunt Julia stood off to one side, not attempting to interfere. No one was even pretending to look in shop windows now. I could sense a crowd gathering. Someone laughed. I was hot with shame and mortification. I hated everyone. My stupid self, most of all.

I shook and jerked with the effort of speaking. To tell them to stop, for God’s sake. To give me a few minutes peace. All these people who professed to care for me so much and I was ignored by every single one of them. I wished the ground would open up and swallow me. I wished I’d never been born at all.

‘Jenny,’ said Thomas. ‘*I would like you to stay very calm, please. Don’t try to speak and especially, don’t cry. Please just stand quietly. Try to let it all go over your head. Help is coming.*’

And indeed, it was. Andrew shouldered his way through the crowd, took in the situation at a glance, didn’t even bother trying to speak to the protagonists, threw my boxes to the ground, put his arm round my shoulders, and took me

away to Tanya's office.

She was just saying goodbye to a client. She and Andrew obviously had their own code, because she said to her assistant, 'You will give me no more calls, please,' and took us into her office.

I sat quietly in a chair with a box of tissues and Thomas breathing into my hair. The smell of warm ginger biscuits pervaded the room and slowly, everything subsided back into place.

When I was able to look around me again, Tanya was dissuading Andrew from thumping his cousin.

'It will not help,' she told him. She looked at me. 'The damage is done.' I don't think she was talking about my face. 'There has been a public argument and charges were made. The whole town will talk of it. The best course is to ignore everything. You must all seem to be on excellent terms as soon as possible. Some sort of public meal is a good idea. Jenny must not be injured any more. That is most important. And you, Andrew, will not hit Russell again.'

Again?

'Actually, my angel, the last person to hit Russell was you.'

'No, actually, Jenny, the last person to hit Russell was you.'

'No, actually, it was Francesca.'

'Now, I will tell my assistant I have finished today and we will all have a quiet meal at home. Jenny, you will stay with us tonight. I will telephone to Russell.'

If he'd even noticed I'd gone.

'He will not argue, I think, and tomorrow he can collect you from us and you will not hit him, Andrew. No one will hit Russell.'

'Hitting Russell seems to be the favourite pastime around here.'

I made no answer.

Andrew and Tanya had a small flat in what had been the old eye hospital. The conversion was very nice and they had a large balcony with views over the river. We all sat in the kitchen. I was given potatoes to peel and carrots to scrape. Andrew cut up onions and meat. Tanya defrosted a cheesecake and ordered everyone around. I think we all enjoyed it. This was my first experience of a normal household. No one shouted. Andrew and Tanya danced round each other in the kitchen, never colliding, each aware of the other. Once, he lifted her hair and kissed her neck.

I felt unbelievably lonely.

He put a glass of wine in front of me. The telephone rang and I took a large swig.

'It's all right,' said Thomas.

Andrew answered the phone, but Tanya held out her hand. 'Please give it to me.'

He handed it over, winked at me, and picked up his wine.

'Russell? Yes, of course she is here. Did you think we would leave her

standing in the middle of the pavement while you and FrancescaKingdom made fools of yourselves? No, you may not speak to her. She is considerably distressed.'

I nodded into my wine. Goddammit, I was distressed. Thomas chuckled.

'No you may not come round tonight. We are about to have a quiet meal and an enjoyable evening and it will not be either if you are here. I leave it to you to explain to your household how you managed to lose your wife in the middle of Rushford, although I am sure by now there is not much they do not know. That is a problem for you to manage. You may, if she wishes it, speak to Jenny tomorrow. That is for her to decide. In the meantime may I suggest you take some time to think over your recent disgraceful behaviour and if I see signs of genuine remorse and a willingness to do better, then I shall do my best to dissuade Andrew from knocking you to the ground. Again. Alternatively, if I am in the mood, I may do it myself. Goodnight, Russell.'

She put the phone down.

'Wow. Shock and awe!'

'Did he actually manage to get a word in?' asked Andrew, beaming at her.

'I do not know. I was not listening. Jenny, drink more wine.'

'Yes, Jenny, drink more wine before she turns on us.'

It was a lovely evening. They both, in their own ways, made me feel comfortable and at home. Andrew told me funny stories about his work. Tanya ordered us both gently around. I had a long bath and emerged in borrowed PJs and an enormous fluffy dressing gown. Andrew laughed and rolled up the sleeves for me. Tanya gave me some cream for my cheek after Andrew checked it wasn't for ear canker. The food was fine. And no one shouted. We played Trivial Pursuit afterwards and Thomas helped me with the answers until, worn out with the day, I was sent to bed.

I didn't mean to listen, but as I left the bathroom, I heard Tanya say, 'That may be true, but it is too late, Andrew. She is to divorce him.'

'He'll never let that happen, believe me.'

'Do you think she knows that?'

'Hard to say. She's nowhere near as stupid as people think.'

I passed silently down the hall to my bedroom.

Tanya brought me tea the next morning. We ate a large, late breakfast and afterwards, Andrew settled down to do his accounts. Tanya emptied her briefcase on the table and muttered over its contents and I curled up with a book. Occasionally, one of us got up and made coffee. Classical music played quietly in the background. It was the most peaceful day I'd had for a very long time.

At two o'clock, someone rang the bell. Tanya put her folder back in her briefcase and Andrew switched off his computer. He went to the door and came back with Russell.

Tanya pointed to an armchair. 'You will sit.'

Wisely, he complied.

‘We will make coffee in the kitchen,’ she announced. ‘It will take about ten minutes. You may have two chances Russell, since you will certainly make a mess of your first apology.’

‘Apology?’

‘One down. Only one attempt left. Use it wisely.’ She and Andrew melted into the kitchen.

‘To listen at the serving hatch if they have any sense.’

He looked at me. I looked back. The silence dragged on.

For a long time he sat, twisting his hands and looking down at his feet. Just for once, he couldn’t think of anything to say. He’d stood and shouted at my aunt in the street. He’d been publicly slapped. Aunt Julia had accused him of hitting me. He really couldn’t think of anything to say.

I couldn’t think of anything either. I remembered my shameful struggle to speak. There were no words to make this right. Where did we go from here?

The minutes ticked away.

Finally, he looked up and said, ‘Your cat bit me.’

He held up a bandaged finger.

Thomas’s snort was echoed in the kitchen.

I didn’t dare laugh.

‘It throbs,’ he said, plaintively.

‘You’d better let me take a look,’ said Andrew coming in from the kitchen with mugs on a tray. ‘It might be infected.’

‘I expect it is,’ he said, gloomily. ‘That bloody cat hates me.’

‘Everyone hates you at the moment, mate,’ said Andrew. ‘Death by cat bite is nothing to what Tanya’s got in store for you.’

‘Do you hate me?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘Well, you’re the only one that really matters. Everyone else will just have to get over it.’

Tanya came in with the coffee and he stood, warily.

‘Thank you for looking after Jenny. Both of you.’

To relieve the embarrassment, Andrew began to unwind the bandage. ‘Oh, yuk.’

‘What?’ said Russell, anxiously. ‘This is my painting hand.’

‘You haven’t painted in years so stop whining.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘That’s what we were doing ... yesterday. Buying painty stuff.’

‘Really? Well, good for you, Russ. About time. Does that hurt?’

‘Ow. No,’ he said, unconvincingly.

‘Well it should do. You’re oozing.’

Everyone craned their necks to look at Russell’s ooze.

‘I’ll clean it up for you and put a proper dressing on it. If it doesn’t get better go to the doctor.’

Tanya poured the coffee.

‘I wish you’d come home, Jenny. Mrs Crisp won’t stop crying. Your

bloody cat bit me when I wasn't looking. Kevin wants to know whether to uproot some shrub or other, Marilyn keeps wandering around looking for you and Boxer ... hasn't worked out what's going on yet, but he'll be upset when he does. And Sharon's made a cake. Please come home. Why are you crying? Now what have I done?"

'For God's sake, Russell,' said Andrew. 'Just shut up, will you.'

'But ...'

'I'm sorry, Jenny, he doesn't have a clue.'

'But ...'

Tanya yanked Andrew back into the kitchen again. I remembered the way he'd lifted her hair ...

Now Russell really was caught between a rock and a hard place. They were obviously expecting him to kiss and make up, unaware of the terms of the agreement.

'What will he do?'

He crossed to the sofa and sat beside me, taking my hand. 'You're a great deal too good for me, wife.'

I thought I'd help him out a little and rested my head on his shoulder. He put his other arm around me, gently lifted my chin, and kissed me softly on the lips. And who knows what would have happened next, but the telephone rang.

He looked down with an expression I didn't understand at all. 'Saved by the bell, Jenny.' Although which of us had been saved wasn't really clear.

After we'd drunk the coffee, he said to me, 'I thought you might like to come back with me this afternoon and help me put my studio back together.'

'You mean the poor girl can lug all those boxes up all those stairs while you arrange your paints in a pretty pattern.'

'No, I meant what I said. You can help me lay it all out, set up my easel, put my paper away. That sort of thing.'

I remembered him saying no one ever went into his studio. He was making a genuine effort.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'd like that very much.'

'I found your Vermeer book. It's in your room.'

Your room? I saw Andrew and Tanya exchange a tiny glance.

'We will all return with Jenny and help Russell with his studio,' announced Tanya. She threw him a challenging glare and he nodded. 'And then we shall see what Jenny wants to do.'

'You really don't need me, do you?' said Thomas. *'It's like having your own private Panzer Division.'*

Russell's studio lay at the end of the other bit of the upstairs dogleg. It was empty. Swept clean. He'd painted it, along with the rest of the house, but he hadn't bothered with the paint-splattered floor. The windows were bare. The walls were bare. The air was stale. He forced open a window and we all looked around.

'Bleak,' said Thomas.

He wasn't the only one who thought so. Andrew was staring around, his face tight. I guessed he'd been in here in happier times and this had come as a shock. For the first time he saw the full extent of the damage. As Russell went to step past him, Andrew gently rubbed his arm. Neither of them looked at the other. Neither spoke, but comfort was offered and accepted. I looked away, not wanting to intrude. When I looked back, they were about six feet apart.

'Right,' said Russell with a bit of an effort. 'Andrew and I will bring everything up here. Tanya and Jenny will open the boxes. We'll get it all out and then Tanya will tell us where to put it.' However, he was grinning at her as he said it and she smiled back. Maybe she'd seen that moment too.

Nobody trusted me with a Stanley knife, so Tanya slit and I unpacked. Andrew and Russell toiled up and down the stairs. Mrs Crisp brought us tea and cake.

Actually, it was a lovely way to spend an afternoon. Russell and Andrew took an easel each and had a competition to see who could get his assembled first. When compared with pictures of the finished product, Russell's was back to front and Andrew's was inside out.

'*What is it with humans and flat-pack?*' said Thomas. '*It says quite clearly to fit flange A to hinge B. How could they get it so wrong?*'

Tanya pushed them aside. She assembled; I passed her the bits as required. We had them both done in ten minutes. Andrew and Russell, their manhood affronted, sulked.

Tanya and Russell laid out his paints, I stacked his canvases and Andrew laid his various sketchpads on a shelf, demanding to know why one man needed seventeen, eighteen, nineteen sketchpads.

'I'm an artist,' said Russell, loftily. 'Ordinary people wouldn't understand. Don't knock yourself out stacking them neatly – I prefer them a bit battered.'

'Why?'

'It's not easy making the first marks in a pristine, virginal sketchbook. It sullies their perfection and I get hung up. So I knock them around a bit first. A friend of mine in college actually used to leave his out in the rain so they were all wrinkled and crinkled when he used them. He reckoned it worked wonders for his creativity.'

I could see Andrew forming a sentence in which the words 'pretentious' and 'pillock' were going to play a large part so it was just as well that Mrs Crisp stuck her head around the door.

Sadly, the news was not good. 'Mrs Kingdom is here.'

'*Do you realise we've seen more of her in the last month than in the previous twenty years?*'

'Yes,' I said, wearily.

'*Has she come to apologise?*'

'Doubt it.'

'She said to tell you there was no rush. She knows you're busy up here.'

When you have a moment, she just wants to check you're recovered.'

Russell nipped out a moment, returning to say, 'I dare you to make her wait.'

'For how long?'

'Bet you can't last fifteen minutes.'

'Don't do that, Russ. If she has to wait too long she'll come up here herself. Do you want that?'

'God, no. Jenny, get yourself down those stairs. Now. Chop chop.'

'Aren't you coming?'

'Are you kidding? Now get down there and sacrifice yourself for the common good. Go!'

I glared at him, which had about as much effect as liquid on a small floating bird's back and hurried down the landing to the stairs. Oh, God, he was right. She was half way up the stairs, fumbling in her handbag. She looked up.

'Oh, Jenny, there you are. You look much better.'

I got as far as, 'Hello, Aunt Ju-' and my right foot slid out from underneath me and I crashed backwards. I tried to grab the banister and save myself, but I was travelling so fast I couldn't get a grip and twisted my wrist. I caught a glimpse of Aunt Julia's horrified face and then I was tumbling downstairs, hitting every last one of them with knees, elbows, hips: every bone in my body. The only thing I didn't hit was my head so I was fully conscious for every single, painful moment of it. I finally crashed to a halt, half on and half off the bottom three stairs.

Above me, I could hear Aunt Julia calling for help. Mrs Crisp and Sharon dashed out of the kitchen. Andrew and Russell ran along the landing.

I rolled over and fell off the bottom three stairs. I could see people racing towards me from all directions. Tanya stopped at Aunt Julia who had run up to the landing and was now sitting on the top step, her face as white as the handkerchief clutched to her chest.

'No, no,' she said, hoarsely. 'Please, see to Jenny. I'll be all right. I just need a minute. See to Jenny.'

Russell was there and he was pretty pale too. 'Jenny? Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' I said faintly, because the fall had knocked all the wind out of me and breathing hurt. All my bones hurt. You really don't want to fall down a long flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs.

Andrew felt along my arms and legs. 'It's OK,' he said. 'I do this for dogs all the time.' On his instructions, I wiggled fingers and feet, reassured him about my spine and pelvis, denied any injury to my head and told him he was holding up three fingers.

'Can you get up?'

'Not yet,' I told him. 'Give me a minute.'

I closed my eyes and waited for the comfort of warm ginger biscuits to envelop me.

'There. How's that?'

‘Better, thank you.’

‘*What happened?*’

‘I slipped. Please just give me a minute.’

Russell was gently brushing the hair off my forehead, his own face full of concern. ‘Just take it slowly, Jenny, there’s no rush. We’ll get you an ambulance.’

I shook my head.

‘No arguments. That was a bad fall.’

I shook my head again and whispered, ‘No, really ... I’ll be fine ... Nothing is broken.’

Andrew said, ‘No, I think she’s right. Nothing seems to be broken and she hasn’t banged her head. But I’d get the doctor in just the same.’ He grinned. ‘He can take a look at your hand at the same time.’

Tanya came down the stairs. ‘Russell, you and Andrew will lift Jenny very carefully onto the sofa and then come back for Mrs Kingdom.’

I suddenly remembered Aunt Julia’s white, shocked face. ‘Is she all right?’

‘Yes, but she too needs a little time. Russell, while you do that I will ring for her doctor. I believe you said Dr Williams?’

‘Yes. Jenny, I’m going to lift you ...’

‘No. I can walk.’

‘No you can’t.’

‘It hurts whether I ... move or ... not ... so I ... may as well ... move.’

‘*That’s my girl. You’re a bit of a veteran, aren’t you? Do you realise there are whole regiments who’ve incurred fewer injuries than you have this week?*’

I hobbled very painfully to the sofa where Mrs Crisp was waiting with pillows and blankets. A few minutes later, Aunt Julia was seated on the other, with a little more colour in her face, but still looking very shaken. I didn’t blame her. We smiled tentatively at each other.

Mrs Crisp went off to make some tea.

Tanya announced the doctor would be here within the hour.

‘*Well, he knows the way. Do you think you’ll get family rates?*’

Tanya pulled off my shoes and covered me with a blanket. Slowly, the pain retreated although my ribs still felt as if my heart might burst through my chest. Russell sat beside me and held my hand. The house was very silent. I think everyone was in shock.

‘Well,’ said Russell, looking over to her, ‘I have to say I’m very glad you chose to visit us today, Julia.’

She sat a little straighter. ‘If you mean, Russell, that it was fortunate for you that I was on hand to see for myself that it was an accident ...’ Her voice failed.

‘Well, I have to admit, it did cross my mind.’

Fortunately, Mrs Crisp appeared with tea and she gratefully accepted a cup.

‘When the doctor’s been, Mrs Kingdom, I think we should run you home,’

said Andrew. 'I don't think you should drive today. If you like, we can ring Mr Kingdom and he can meet you at your house.'

'That's most kind,' she said, regarding him with rare approval. 'But perhaps it would be easiest if Richard came here and picked me up.'

'Of course,' he said. 'Don't worry about your car. We'll see to it.'

Dr Williams arrived promptly. He examined me and, fortunately, seemed disinclined to take it too seriously.

'You'll have extensive bruising,' he said. 'Or soft tissue trauma as we call it these days. You'll be stiff. You'll ache. I'll write a prescription for some painkillers. Take them because you will need them. I don't know, Jenny. I don't see you in fifteen years and then I never seem to be away from the place.'

We all laughed. Like the last scene in *Scooby Doo*.

'As for you, Mrs Kingdom, just take it easy for the rest of the day. And tomorrow too. Call me if you need anything.'

He disappeared.

Uncle Richard was so sweet I felt my eyes fill up. He said everything that was polite and non-controversial. He thanked Russell for his care of Aunt Julia, gently patted my hand and wished me better soon, told Russell to ring if he could be of any assistance, and took an uncharacteristically quiet Aunt Julia away.

We all drew breath.

Russell took my hand again. 'What do you want, sweetheart? Do you want me to help you upstairs or do you want to stay here for a bit? Shall we leave you in peace?

'Yes, please.'

They all went out. I waited, eyes closed, for five minutes after the door closed, just in case anyone felt the need to come back and check on me.

'Have they gone?'

'Yes, they're outside in the yard, looking at Boxer. No one will come in.'

I sat up painfully and even more painfully, reached down for my shoes. I turned them over. The left one was perfectly normal, smooth, and dry, but the right sole was dark and glistening with some unknown substance. I sniffed. I knew that smell. I'd smelt it all afternoon as Russell unpacked his stuff.

Linseed oil.

'Thomas, can you ...?'

He was already at the head of the stairs. 'No. Nothing here. A slight smear but that could easily have come off your sole. Did you pick it up in the studio?'

'No.'

He stood beside me as I pulled a tissue from my pocket and carefully wiped every single trace of oil from the sole of my shoe.

'We're in trouble, aren't we?'

'Oh yes.'

The next day the police turned up.

Chapter Eleven

I was reading quietly on the sofa and Thomas was watching one of those hospital dramas where everyone is having inappropriate sex with everyone else.

Mrs Crisp slipped into the room.

‘It’s the police, Mrs Checkland.’

My heart knocked painfully against my already battered ribs and I skidded into full-blown panic.

‘Where?’

‘Just pulling up in the yard.’

Someone knocked at the back door.

I stared, paralysed with fright.

This time last week I would have thought – Marilyn! Now I wondered if Aunt Julia had been making mischief.

‘*What if she has?*’ said Thomas calmly. ‘*Falling down stairs is not an indictable offence, especially if carried out in the privacy of one’s own home. It’s probably only about Marilyn again.*’

I said to Mrs Crisp, ‘Where’s Marilyn?’

‘In the field. Sharon will get her inside as soon as she can.’

I had another horrible thought. What had Russell done with Marilyn’s owner? Was his body buried in the garden? I’d never even asked. What sort of wife was I?

I asked, without hope, ‘Where’s Russell?’

‘Taken Kevin and gone out somewhere.’

Someone knocked again.

‘I’d better go and let them in.’

I nodded.

‘Remember, Mrs Checkland, you’re not well.’

I thrust my book under the cushions, flicked off the TV, pulled up the blanket, closed my eyes, and prepared to deceive the police to the best of my ability.

Mrs Crisp re-entered noisily. ‘Are you awake, Mrs Checkland?’

I opened my eyes, artistically.

It was only one police officer and she was a she. She was also a sergeant, a few years older than me, and her stocky figure was made bulkier by her vest. But I knew her. She’d been head girl at my school. And she knew me. It was Marjorie Bates. I remembered her heading the charge, sweeping down the hockey pitch, the day we snatched victory from Rushford St Winifred’s in extra time. And now she was Sgt Bates. As Sgt Bates she radiated solid, calm, good sense, so she stuck out like a sore thumb at Frogmorton.

I smiled and indicated she should sit. Mrs Crisp disappeared to distract her

with tea and as much cake as she could eat.

I know all about the police. I watch TV. I know that any investigation is always headed by a senior officer with a drug habit, or a dodgy past, or marital problems, or tottering on the verge of a mental breakdown. His or her team always consist of stunningly good-looking, ambitious young officers doing each other down at the slightest opportunity and also having masses of inappropriate sex. There's always opposition from unhelpful senior officers more concerned with politics than catching criminals and the serial killer usually turns out to be one of the team. At any moment she would set about me my own telephone directory until I confessed. To anything.

'Good morning, Mrs Checkland.'

I refused to be lulled by good manners.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' she said. 'Especially when you're not well. Was it an accident?'

Still not knowing why she was here, I pointed to the stairs. She got up and had a look.

'That must have hurt.'

I nodded. It had. It still did.

She sat back down again.

'It's just a few quick questions.'

About what? I hoped Sharon had remembered to bring Boxer in as well, otherwise there would be SHOUTING and everyone within a ten-mile radius would know we had a donkey. A stolen donkey.

'Do you know a young man named Kevin Price?'

Oh my God. Kevin. He was wanted by the police after all and they'd tracked him back to us. They'd found him.

I sat up and began the only slightly exaggerated struggle to speak, giving her plenty of time to say she would return when my husband was here. If she could catch him. He was never bloody here.

She waited patiently.

I seized a piece of paper and wrote 'Sorry. I have a stutter,' and passed it to her.

She smiled. 'Not a problem.'

Great. I'd got the only police officer in the country who'd done sensitivity training.

I used the time to think. There was no point in lying. Everyone knew Kevin lived here. It's not as if we'd tried to hide him.

'I don't think that's the problem,' said Thomas. 'We may need to ask ourselves what he was up to before he came to live with us.'

I remembered the squeaky voice saying: 'Give me your bag, lady,' and the complete absence of any sort of threat.

'Yes. Not the most efficient mugger in town.' said Thomas.

She was still waiting while I, a formerly respectable member of society but now married to someone who wasn't, formulated and dismissed plans for

Deceiving The Law.

Finally, as haltingly as I could, I said, 'I know *a* Kevin.'

'What's his last name?'

Oh great. Now I had to admit we'd given refuge to someone who'd refused to tell us his last name. No, hang on, she'd said the name. What was it?

Her smile became slightly more steely and I folded like a badly made origami swan.

'Don't know.'

'You've been putting him up for – what – six months now and you don't know his name?'

'It's Kevin,' I said, defensively. 'We're not complete idiots.'

Thomas snorted unhelpfully.

'Does this Kevin live here in this house?'

'Oh no,' I said, glad to be able to reassure her. 'He lives in the stables.'

Silence.

'*Oh, well done, Jenny,*' said Thomas. '*Now she probably thinks he's feral.*'

'He has a nice room there,' I said desperately, in case she thought he shared a stall with Boxer, and then realised, too late, that if she asked to see it she couldn't miss the world's hottest donkey, also snugly ensconced in our stables, and very possibly the world's hottest donkey's ex-owner bricked up in a cavity there, as well.

I considered having a relapse.

'Well, I'm sure his mum will be very grateful to you for taking him in,' she said.

What?

'When he comes back from wherever he is,' she grinned at me, but not unkindly, 'can you give him this?'

She pulled out an envelope with Kevin's name on the front and put it on the table.

'His step-dad's gone. Arrested him myself,' she said, displaying a certain satisfaction. I was certain telephone directories had been involved. 'His mum's been ringing round his friends. She traced him as far as Rushford and then he dropped out of sight so she asked us to have a go. It wasn't hard. In fact I wish they were all this easy. You're quite high profile here, you know. So if you could just see he gets that.'

'Don't you want to see him and give it to him yourself?'

'No, no need. I've just popped in on my way somewhere else. Good afternoon.'

Russell, just for once, didn't see the funny side.

'Well, you should have been here yourself, then,' I said, somewhat snappily.

There was a pause and then he said, 'Aren't you going to ask where I was?'

'No.'

'You really haven't got the hang of this being a wife business at all, have

you?’

‘There’s never anyone around to practise on.’

He looked as if he might say something and then caught sight of the envelope. ‘What’s this?’

‘She brought a message for Kevin. From his mum. His step-dad’s gone and I think his mum might want him back.’

I began to struggle to my feet, picked up the envelope, and set off in search of Kevin.

Who stared at the envelope for a long time.

‘I expect you’d like some privacy,’ I said, tugging at Russell, who was a bit of a stranger to the concept of privacy. Fortunately he was still brooding over my brush with The Law and put up no resistance.

Kevin disappeared. I saw Mrs Crisp watching Sharon. Russell was watching me. I thought I might go and have a bit of a lie-down. I needed to talk some of this over with Thomas. I needed another point of view.

Russell insisted on helping me up the stairs.

‘I’m not sure that was the wisest thing to do,’ said Thomas, as I lowered myself into the window seat. *‘In fact I don’t think it’s a good idea to be alone with him at all at the moment.’*

‘I know’, I said, ‘but I don’t think even I’m going to fall down the stairs twice running. Besides, I have you to look after me.’

Something in his silence made me look up.

‘Don’t I?’

He still didn’t answer. I felt again that cold hand of premonition,

‘Don’t I?’

He went to stand in his usual place in the corner. He still didn’t speak.

I said in a whisper, ‘Thomas?’

He looked across the room at me and I could see he was crying. All the old familiar fears came flooding back. Everything clenched. I felt the blood drain from my face, leaving it stiff and cold.

I said again, ‘Thomas?’

Finally, he looked up. Two long, dark, tear stains ran down his face. I hadn’t realised, but I was crying too.

‘Thomas, are you leaving me?’ and waited to hear him say, *‘Of course not. I’m here for as long as you need me,’* because that was what he always said and it was certain that I never needed him more than now.

He sighed heavily. *‘I have to go.’*

I panicked.

‘No you mustn’t,’ and struggled to stand up. I think I thought if I could just get my arms around him then I could somehow physically restrain him; stop him somehow, anyhow, from leaving me.

He said, *‘No, don’t. You’ll hurt yourself,’* but I didn’t care. I ran as fast as I could and put both arms round his neck. He lowered his head and breathed into my hair and for the first time ever, it didn’t work.

We were both crying.

Eventually, he said, ‘ *Stop. Jenny, please stop. You’ll make yourself ill. Please, sit down. Sit here on the bed. I promise I won’t leave if you let go. Please, let’s not hurt each other now.* ’

So I slowly let go and sat on the end of the bed. He stood very close and I reached out to touch him. If I could just keep hold of him ... in every sense of the word.

‘*All right now?*’ he said. ‘*Are you able to speak?*’

I swallowed and nodded, determined to be calm.

‘*Jenny, the time has come for me to go. You don’t need me any more.*’

Calm flew out of the window. ‘Yes, I do. You know I do. I’ll always need you. How can you go? How can you go now? You know what’s going on. How can you say I don’t need you? You can’t leave me. Thomas you can’t go. You mustn’t go. I can’t do this by myself. Thomas, please.’

‘*Shhh,*’ he said, gently and the smell of warm ginger biscuits filled the room again. ‘*Hush, Jenny, you’ll make yourself ill.*’

‘I am ill,’ I sobbed, fear and anger roiling around inside me. ‘I’m ill and I’m hurt and I’m in trouble and you’re leaving me.’

I got no reply. Shaking my hair off my face I could see he was crying as hard as I was. I rubbed my nose on my sleeve and gently reached to wipe his tears away.

‘If this is hurting you so much then why are you doing it?’

He thought for a while. ‘*I came to you when you were a child. A confused, frightened child who needed a friend. I’ve stayed with you all these years as your friend. And we are, Jenny, we’re good friends. You are very dear to me.*

‘*But now, you don’t need me any more. No, no, don’t say anything just yet. You really don’t need me to tell you what to do. Just recently, you’ve married, stolen a donkey, listened to and helped poor Mrs Crisp, seen off a bully, rescued a cat, and stood your ground with your husband. And now, young Kevin is sorting himself out and you’ll help with that as well. It’s true, Jenny, you don’t need me to tell you what to do these days. You can decide and do these things for yourself. You’ve outgrown me.*’

‘How can you say that? You know what’s happening here. How could you leave now, of all times? How can you leave me to face this alone?’

‘*But you’re not alone any more. You’re positively festooned with people and animals who wish you well. You can cope with whatever comes your way, Jenny. You always do. You must have noticed.*’

‘But you’re my friend. We’ve been together for so long. You can’t just go.’

‘*I can and I must.*’

‘Must? Why must you go? I need you here.’

He said sadly, ‘*You think you do, but you don’t. And as for “must”... Do you remember when we met?*’

‘Vividly.’

‘*You were so distressed. Do you remember?*’

I nodded.

‘Somewhere ... somewhere there’s a little boy. He’s six. He’s hiding in a cupboard and they’re looking for him. Do you understand now why I must go?’

I was too choked to speak. I could understand. I did understand. But he was my Thomas. My dear friend. And still my only friend. He’d been my constant companion since I was thirteen. He’d protected me from the bullies at school, kept me calm when things overwhelmed me, guided me, laughed with me, brought me joy. I remembered his excitement and enthusiasm in the big DIY store and again in the art shop. I remembered his kindness, his strength. I saw him running across the moors, golden and beautiful.

And free.

He read my thoughts.

‘You do understand, don’t you? I know you do. You’re my Jenny. You’ve grown up to be an exceptional young woman and I’m so proud of you.’

He paused.

‘We’re not supposed to have favourites, but you’re the favourite I haven’t got. Don’t forget me, Jenny.’

As if I ever could.

‘You’re going now? Right this minute?’

‘Yes, I have to. It’s always easier not to draw this out.’

I was crying again, struggling with this thunderbolt. Only a couple of hours ago, we’d been watching TV together. How could this be happening? I stood and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face in his hard neck, smelling the smell of him.

‘Jenny, you have to release me.’

‘You mean, if I don’t, you can’t go?’

‘That’s right. You have to let me go.’

I tightened my grip. ‘I won’t.’

‘Jenny, I have to go. They’re very close. Someone once released me so I could come to you. Now it’s your turn.’

I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t disappoint him. Not now. Not at the very end. I lowered my arms and stepped back. He dropped his head and nuzzled my hair. I smelled warm ginger biscuits for the last time. No words would come.

‘Jenny ...?’

I closed my eyes and said the words that would send him away.

‘I release you.’

‘Farewell, Jenny, my dear friend.’

‘Goodbye Thomas. Don’t forget me.’

‘Never.’

His voice was just a sigh.

He was fading. I could see the outline of the wardrobe behind him.

He disappeared.

The ginger biscuit smell lingered a little longer and then that too was gone.
I thought my world had ended.

Russell tapped on the door. Then again, a little harder. Then gave it a good thump.

‘Jenny? I know you’re in there. Can I come in?’

I waited for Thomas to say something. A silence that was never going to be broken dragged on.

The door opened slowly. ‘Jenny?’

This was not going to be a good day for speaking.

He swiftly crossed the room. ‘What’s happened?’

It wasn’t until he put his arm around me and made me stop that I realised I was sitting, knees drawn up, rocking backwards and forwards. Classic grief and shock.

He must have seen he’d get nothing from me. He crossed to the door and shouted for Mrs Crisp and the next thing I was covered in a blanket and clutching a glass with a small amount of brandy in the bottom.

Voices came and went, but not the voice I so wanted to hear. I tuned them all out and spent some time not thinking of anything at all. When I finally returned to this world, unsure where I’d been, it was nearly dark. Russell was sitting by the bed.

I watched him for a while, still for once, rumpled and shadowed. And more vulnerable than he knew. Even as I looked he opened his eyes. His hands were nearly as cold as mine. I tried for a smile, but not today.

‘Do you need a doctor?’

I moved my head slightly. No.

He took a breath. ‘Shall I fetch your aunt?’

No.

‘Tanya?’

No. the one person in all the world I really wanted to see was never coming back. Ever. I closed my eyes and hot tears ran down my cheeks. I felt him sit on the bed and put his arms around me.

‘That’s my girl. Have a good cry.’

So I did. I cried for Thomas, for the parents I’d barely known, for the mess I’d made of my life, for loneliness, for pretty well everything.

He stroked and soothed and spoke to me using his Boxer voice. He made me blow my nose. And again. He held the mug while I sipped some tea and didn’t shout when I fell asleep before finishing.

When I awoke it was the next day and he was still there, more untidy and tired-looking than ever. Mrs Crisp was bringing tea. That was what had woken me. I wondered why everyone was in my room, looked over at the empty corner, remembered and felt myself begin to slide away again. Away from the long, lonely, frightening life ahead of me.

‘Open your eyes, sweetheart. There’s some tea here.’

I sipped obediently.

‘Well done.’ He wiped my face. ‘How are you feeling?’

I nodded.

And that was the end of Mr Nice Guy.

‘No,’ he said sternly. ‘Speak.’

I shook my head and closed my eyes again.

He pinched the back of my hand. Hard. It hurt. My eyes flew open.

‘Speak. Or I’ll pick up the phone and before you know it you’ll be up to your ears in doctors and aunts. What happened, Jenny? Tell me. Now.’

It took some doing and half of me hoped he’d get fed up and go, but he didn’t. Finally, in a tiny thread of a voice, I said, ‘I lost my friend.’

Which was true.

He didn’t bother with easy sympathy. ‘Do I know him or her?’

I shook my head. He saw my laptop nearby.

‘An Internet friend?’

Yes, that would do.

I nodded.

‘What happened?’

‘It was very sudden. He’s just – gone.’

‘Just like that? No warning?’

I shook my head.

‘Had you known your friend long?’

‘Fifteen years.’

‘Oh, Jenny. And it’s not as if you had that many friends to begin with. Were you close?’

‘I told him everything. He helped me. He made things not so bad.’

If he noticed the ‘he’, he made no comment.

We sat in silence for a long time.

‘It’s not easy, losing someone. Without warning. It’s like having a piece of yourself ripped out.’

I nodded. That was exactly what it was like. He knew. He’d lost his mother. He’d lost Francesca. Both without warning.

‘It doesn’t do to dwell too much on the past, Jenny. Trust me. Of course you must respect the memory of your friend and the best way to do that is to carry on with your life. Hold the memories in your heart. Keep them safe and you’ll find they’re there when you need them.’

I nodded, not looking at the empty corner.

‘Now, up you get. Come down and have something to eat. There’s donkeys to feed, gardens to work in, Kevins to advise. Your friend helped you. Now the time has come to pass on that help to others.’

For a moment, I could almost hear an echo of Thomas’s voice in the corner. Russell had said exactly the right thing. Who would have thought it?

I nodded. ‘You don’t look so hot yourself.’

He smiled and got up. ‘My wife is a darling, but very high maintenance. I’ll be back in half an hour. Be ready.’

I was very obedient. I did exactly as I was told. I showered and dressed, albeit very slowly. I ate what was put in front of me. I helped muck out the stables. I listened while Mrs Crisp talked of menus and household accounts. I sat with a trowel in my hand and watched Kevin work in the garden. I forgot to hide my chocolate digestives and a surprised but delighted Marilyn could hardly believe her luck. After lunch, we sat down with Kevin.

He had his letter in front of him. It was folded, but I could just see the ending – ‘Your loving Mum,’ and three kisses.

I would not have thought anything could pierce the fog of misery in which I had wrapped myself, but the sight of his face shocked me into thinking of someone other than myself for a change. Gone was the happy, relaxed Kevin who pottered about the yard, teasing and being teased by Marilyn. He looked exactly as he had on that first night. Except he was about a foot taller. And wider.

Mrs Crisp put tea on the table, shot me a worried look, and then took herself off with Sharon, who was shooting worried looks at Kevin. The only sound was the cat, sprawled belly-up in front of the range. I didn’t know cats snored.

‘For God’s sake,’ said Russell, irritably. ‘Someone put a tea-towel over it. A food preparation area is no place to be showing us where his privates used to be. Suppose the vicar calls. Eh?’ I tried to think of something – anything – less likely than the clergy turning up to visit the Gomorrah that was Frogmorton Farm.

‘Now then, young Kevin,’ he said briskly, but not unkindly. ‘What’s happening?’

He swallowed. ‘I’ve had a letter from my mum,’ he said, which we knew, but he got no further.

I felt Russell twitch with impatience beside me, and felt a twinge of alarm, but he said only, ‘Have you decided what to do?’

‘She wants me to go and live with her again. He’s gone. My step-dad’s gone. But ...’ he trailed off, blinking at the letter.

‘But you’re not sure if you want to go back,’ supplied Russell. ‘You’re worried the same thing might happen again when the next man comes along. You’re not sure how you feel about her making you leave in the first place. And you’re worried we’ll make you leave now you have somewhere to go. You’ve had a taste of independence and you like it here.’

And if he leaves he won’t be able to spend his days being reduced to blushing incoherency every time Sharon looks at him, I thought.

‘But,’ continued Russell, ‘you feel bad because you do really want to see your mum again, but you’re not sure what to say or do when you do see her.’

He nodded.

I was impressed. But, of course, he’d been in the army. Young men and their troubles were not the mystery to him that they were to me.

‘Well, to deal with these things in order. You know your mum best, of

course. How likely is it to happen again? Do you think she will have learned from her mistake? And we all make mistakes, Kev. Even parents aren't perfect. Everyone screws up occasionally. One day it might be you, but my guess is that when you do, she'll still welcome you back with open arms because that's what mothers do. It's in their job description.

'And there's no chance of us chucking you out. Boxer's got used to you and you're the only one brave enough to tackle the garden without full SWAT-style protection and flame-thrower. So don't worry about that. One day you will want to go. And we'll miss you. But not just yet.'

Kevin nodded again, staring at the table.

'So here's a thought. Go and stay for a weekend. That way you can come back quite naturally on the Monday which will give both of you chance to think things over in your own time. See how it goes. What do you think?'

He nodded again.

'And if she wants to visit you here, to make sure we're not abusing you or selling you into slavery, then that's fine. Just let us know so we can keep that bloody cat covered up. In fact, I'm not sure what it's still doing here?' he said accusingly.

That was true. He'd initially demanded it be removed from the premises and when his entire household had stared reproachfully at him, had amended this to grudgingly allowing it to sleep in the stable, where at least it might prove useful keeping the rodents down. The cat, of course, had ignored him and snagged the warmest and most comfortable place in the house. His body language suggested he was immovable.

Kevin spoke at last. 'There was something else,' he said.

'Yes?'

'The garden. I like it. I like doing it. I wondered ... Well, I thought ... The thing is, I'd like to do it properly. And all the time. So I went to the library and got some details about the college. And they do a landscaping course. There's a certificate at the end of it. And then I could get a proper job. No, I don't mean that the way it sounds, but I can't impose on you for ever. It's not a full-time course and I thought I could still work here, and then maybe, if I pass the course, you could give me some references. For a job, I mean, and maybe for if I find somewhere to live ...'

He pulled a crumpled leaflet from his pocket and shoved it in front of Russell and said to me, 'But of course, I won't go until the garden's finished. I couldn't anyway, because the new course doesn't start until September, but I have to go and talk to them and find out what equipment I need and how much it costs and everything.'

Russell was smoothing out the leaflet. 'Well, good for you, Kevin. But a word of advice – go and talk to them now and get your name down quick. Sometimes they don't run these courses if not enough people sign up and sometimes there's too many people want to do it and it's first come first served. Either way, go and talk to them. I'm going into Rushford tomorrow to

shout at Charlie Daniels about this bloody feed bill again, or maybe just bang his head against the wall and set fire to his office – it depends how I feel – and you can nip off to the college then.’

‘All right, thank you,’ said Kevin, looking suddenly much better.

‘Right,’ said Russell, looking around him. ‘Anything else while I’m on a roll? Shall I lead us out of recession? Solve the problems in the Middle East? Find a competent politician? Put the cat out? No? I’m off to spend a quiet afternoon in my studio. Do you want to come, wife?’

Actually, I just wanted to go back to my room, but Thomas would have had something to say about that, so I nodded, picked up a book so he wouldn’t feel he had to talk to me, and followed him as he galloped up the stairs.

What a difference. Tanya’s careful arrangement of his equipment was abandoned. Everything was everywhere. Pictures and newspaper cuttings were stuck higgledy-piggledy all over the walls. The now familiar smell of linseed oil hit me in the face. Stained canvases leaned against the walls. Both easels held a canvas – a landscape on one and something swirly on the other. Sketches, big and small littered the big table. On top was a rather nice study of some autumn leaves. I would have liked to look through them, but good manners prevailed. I picked my way carefully across the floor, which was equally strewn with books, a couple of empty beer bottles, and a pizza box he was obviously hiding from Mrs Crisp. I cautiously zig-zagged to the sofa, made myself a little nest of pillows and cushions, picked up my book, and fell asleep.

‘Well, you’re a stimulating companion,’ said my husband, when I opened my eyes half an hour later. ‘I’d hoped for witty banter, the exchange of ideas, the stimulation of creative juices, the wifely chirps of encouragement, and all I got was snoring. Do you want some tea?’

I nodded, still pulling myself together.

‘Well, stick the kettle on and make some, there’s a good girl.’

I scowled at him, made two cups of tea, and brought one over.

‘What do you think?’

He’d done a delightful sketch of Marilyn peering angelically through her fringe, usually just prior to doing something completely outrageous.

‘It’s perfect,’ I said. ‘That’s just how she looked before she ate that pack of chocolate digestives. Can we frame it?’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I was thinking we could use it as our Christmas card. It’s going to be our one and only Christmas together so we ought to make it a bit special. You know the sort of thing, “Season’s Greetings from Russell and Jenny Checkland.” We’ll send them out to people we like and in a few years their rarity value will make them worth a bit. They’ll become collectors’ items and when I’m rich and famous, people will auction theirs off for a fortune.’

Something else I’d forgotten about during my current bout of misery. In just over six months, I would be leaving, and whereas a little place somewhere to share with Thomas was an appealing prospect, suddenly, living

alone wasn't half so inviting. But I didn't want to appear clinging and pathetic, so I sipped my tea and nodded.

He didn't say anything either, and the silence just went on and on. The view outside darkened as the afternoon wore on. A bit of a metaphor, really.

A couple of weeks drifted by. The weather warmed up. Kevin and I cleared more of the garden. We borrowed books from the library and I downloaded various bits from the Internet. We propped them up in front of us and did our best. I tried hard to be enthusiastic, but inside was always a great, gaping Thomas-sized hole.

Russell was painting – we could hear him shouting. Occasionally, something got thrown across the room. But most afternoons he was out. Or if he was staying in, he'd get a telephone call, shout something incomprehensible over his shoulder, jump into his Land Rover, and roar out of the yard. No one knew where he was going. I ignored the little voice inside which said: 'You know where he's going,' because Thomas would want me to and actually, how much did I care?

The cat, as unstoppable as continental drift, oozed into the living room and lay in front of the fire each evening, adding the distinctive smell of hot cat to the room.

Kevin came back from his mother's, looking tired but better and, on the next visit, Sharon went with him.

Mrs Crisp spent less time in her room. I learned to cook Shepherd's Pie, Chocolate Sponge, Toad in the Hole, and Spag Bol, all with varying degrees of success. If she noticed she was teaching me single woman dishes, she said nothing.

Marilyn put on weight, learned how to open the door into the mud room and from there into the kitchen and was discovered pulling the cloth off the table in an attempt to dislodge the fruit bowl.

'Clever girl,' said Russell, admiringly.

'Naughty girl,' chided Mrs Crisp, not very convincingly.

'Lucky girl,' I thought. You never caught Marilyn worrying about the future.

Russell and I went to dinner with Andrew and Tanya. I watched the unobtrusive togetherness that comes from a shared understanding of each other and realised I was lonelier now than ever before.

The silver lining was that Uncle Richard and Aunt Julia were away for three weeks in Portugal, where they went every year.

'Poor old Portugal,' said Russell. 'What did they ever do to us? Now then, Jenny, it's your birthday on Saturday. What would you like to do?'

I'd forgotten. Because all my days had been pretty much the same, I'd never had a good sense of time. I could usually identify the current season; narrowing it down to the month was a bit more difficult; and naming the actual date was pretty well impossible. It was a good job he reminded me.

I remembered back to last year. Thomas and I had rented John Carpenter's

The Thing and with a household-sized bar of chocolate had enjoyed an evening of delighted terror. This year I wasn't even sure I could be bothered.

Other people, however, had different plans. Russell awoke me at some awful hour, bouncing across the room like an over-cafeinated Tigger. I suspected he'd stood outside the door, looking at his watch until it showed the earliest possible time Mrs Crisp had told him would be acceptable.

He handed me a cup of tea. A tray with a rose would have been nice, but this was Russell. At least it was in a receptacle.

'Birthday breakfast downstairs,' he said. 'Don't be long.'

Chance would have been a fine thing. Fifteen minutes later he was banging at the door again. I bundled my hair up in a scrunchie and opened the door.

'This way,' he said, grabbing my wrist and for a moment, I was back in my first day here when I'd got the tour. How exciting and wonderful everything had seemed. When Thomas had been with me. How could it all go so wrong?

The table was laid with a huge breakfast. Russell served Buck's Fizz. My place had a little pile of presents. I was touched they had taken all this trouble. Mrs Crisp gave me a little book of simple recipes with, most importantly of all, colour pictures of the finished dish so I had something to aim at. Sharon gave me a pretty scarf. Kevin had carved a little mouse from a piece of wood. What a talented boy he was turning out to be. And there was a big box of chocolates from Boxer, the cat, and Marilyn. I opened all my cards and stood them on the table in front of me. No one mentioned there was nothing from Aunt Julia or Uncle Richard. Maybe it was in the post.

We all sat down together, and even I picked up a little of the excitement in the room. The Buck's Fizz helped. When we'd finished, Sharon got up and Russell said, 'Close your eyes.'

Not without some misgivings, I did as I was told. I heard a space being cleared on the table. Something was put down. There was whispering.

Finally, Russell said, 'OK, open your eyes.'

It was a birthday cake. It was THE birthday cake. It was fabulous. Two storeys high – or whatever you call a cake with two floors, covered in green and purple iced stripes and spots. The two levels were deliberately crooked, giving it a wonderful lop-sided look. Big purple cellophane bows decorated the sides and funky green sparklers were carefully embedded in the top. It was the most exuberant, joyful cake I'd ever seen in my entire life.

Russell lit the sparklers and they all sang, 'Happy Birthday'. They all looked so pleased and excited and I thought suddenly how lucky I was and that maybe the future could take care of itself after all.

'Don't try and blow the sparklers out,' said Russell helpfully. 'But don't forget to make a wish.'

So I did and it came true.

We all had a slice, there and then. The bottom layer was orange and lemon and the top layer was chocolate, so some of us, Russell, had two slices.

I said to Sharon, 'Did you make this?'

She nodded, proud and happy, and I made up my mind there and then that she would have her own cake shop one day. Genius like this deserved world-wide appreciation.

Eggs, bacon, mushrooms, toast, marmalade, birthday cake, and two glasses of Buck's Fizz. I was feeling more cheerful than I had in weeks. I tied the scarf round my neck and carefully put the mouse and book to one side.

There was an odd pause and in the silence, I heard the sound of an engine.

'Goodness,' said Russell. 'I wonder what this could be.'

'Oh. Perhaps I should open the gate,' said Kevin.

'Yes,' said Sharon. 'I will help.'

'I will come too,' said Mrs Crisp and I stared at them, wondering if I wasn't the only one who'd had too much to drink at breakfast.

Russell stopped and for some reason shoved a couple of carrots in his pocket, but I'd been married to him for nearly six months now and it took a lot more than that to amaze me these days.

A horsebox was backing in through the gate. There were lots of shouted instructions which Martin Braithwaite had the sense to ignore. At last, he switched off the engine and jumped down.

'Morning all. Happy Birthday, Jenny.' He began to let down the back. Kevin went to help.

'Stand here, Jenny,' said Russell and disappeared inside the box. Everything went very quiet. Suddenly, I was breathless. Something was going to happen. He re-appeared, and following him down the ramp, picking his way carefully, came a neat, dapple-grey horse, sturdily built and with an iron grey mane and tail.

He arrived at the bottom, lifted his head, pricked his ears, looked straight at me – at me! – and uttered a soft, low sound.

I was transfixed; rooted to the spot. Huge, liquid, dark eyes surveyed me placidly and apparently I wasn't found wanting because he stretched his head towards me.

I stepped forward. He lowered his head and I felt his warm breath through my T-shirt. I gently stroked his cheek. He was beautiful.

'Happy birthday, Jenny,' said Russell, softly, and put the leading rein into my hand.

Chapter Twelve

I felt exactly the same disbelief I'd experienced when he asked me to marry him – that this was something too good ever to happen to me.

'Here,' said Russell, handing me a carrot. 'Show him you're his friend.'

He took the carrot very gently, his soft lips tickling my palm. I gently stroked his velvet nose.

'That was good, Jenny. You're very confident,' said Russell. This was probably not the moment to tell him I'd spent the last fifteen years with an invisible horse.

'May I hope that, just for once, I have rendered my wife speechless for all the right reasons?'

I nodded, still unable to drag my eyes away. He'd finished his carrot and was now calmly surveying the yard around him, apparently quite at home.

Russell was rattling on. 'You never asked where I was going, did you, so thank you for making it so easy for me. I have to say I've been all over the county this last month. You very nearly got a beautiful little mare, the colour of polished mahogany, named Firefly, but something held me back and as soon as I clapped eyes on this fellow, I knew he was the one for you. He's absolutely bombproof. He's loving and affectionate and a complete gentleman. In fact, his previous owner says that if ever she felt herself falling off, he would stop of his own accord and wait for her to pull herself back together again. He loves attention and being handled. I think the two of you were made for each other.'

I could hardly get it out. 'What's his name?'

'Thomas.'

I caught my breath. Thomas hadn't stayed – but he'd sent. I should have known. I should have trusted him. He would never leave me completely alone. Warm joy flooded through me.

'He's really for me?'

'He's really for you.'

I tidied his forelock neatly and stroked his face, almost too full to speak. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

'No, really, thank you.'

'No really, you're welcome.'

A thought occurred to me. I said quietly, 'But ...what about ... you know ... next year?'

'We'll talk about that later. Shall we take him inside to meet the resident loonies? Now, just keep a firm hold, look as if you know what you're doing, and lead him in. Kevin, can you open his box, please?'

The first one was still empty, but I led him into the second. Marilyn was

next door and Boxer in the big one at the end. Both of them nearly fell over themselves, craning their necks to look.

‘Yes, it’s easy to see who’s going to be the brains of this outfit,’ said Russell, following on behind. ‘Mind you, in this place you could stand a brick on the table and it would still be the most intelligent thing for miles around.’

I proudly led Thomas into his box. Kevin had it all ready for him. I unclipped the rein, gave him a final pat, and joined Russell.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘Let’s just give him a little peace and quiet. They can all get acquainted and then, if Marilyn hasn’t eaten him, we’ll turn them out together. Anyone fancy another slice of cake?’

But I couldn’t be dragged away. I watched Thomas – my Thomas – investigate his box, pull at his hay net, peer through the partition at Marilyn, who peered back, rather in the manner of the abyss, and then, apparently, he went to sleep.

‘Told you,’ said Russell, turning up with a plate and a mug. ‘Nothing rattles him. A bit of much-needed sanity around the place. By the way, tell that cat of yours if I find him on my bed again, I’ll make mittens out of him.’

‘Russell ...’

‘Yes, love? Do you want that cake?’

I shook my head. ‘Russell, what about when I ... leave? I could reasonably take the cat with me, but a horse ...?’

‘I told you, I’ll help you find somewhere. And even if we can’t, you can still keep him here. I don’t mind. And Mrs Crisp will be pleased to see you when you visit.’

‘Russell, your next wife is not ... going to want me wandering in and out a couple of times a week.’

‘My next wife?’ he said, thunderstruck. ‘What next wife?’

‘Well, when I’m ... gone, you’ll still need money, won’t you? You should be looking around, so you have someone already lined up. Smooth transition.’

He actually put the cake down. ‘I don’t want to marry anyone else,’ he said, after a long pause.

‘But what about ...?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll think of something. But it definitely won’t be marriage; I’ll tell you that for nothing.’

I said in a small voice, ‘Has it been so ... bad?’

‘No, of course not, but I can’t see myself marrying again, somehow.’

‘Russell, you’re an idiot. You’re ... personable, quite charming when you concentrate, and you have this lovely house. Unless there’s something ... badly wrong with the women in Rushford, you’ll be fighting them off with a stick.’

‘Mrs Crisp will be my chaperone and bodyguard. I’ll buy her one of those earpieces and some dark glasses.’

He would go back to Francesca. As soon as the door closed behind me, she would be over here like a Bengal tiger to a tethered goat.

He was watching me. ‘No, I won’t.’

‘Won’t what?’

‘Get back with Francesca. I’m not putting my hand in that fire again. I’m off leggy red-heads for good. They bring you nothing but grief,’ said my leggy, red-headed husband.

I put my hand on his arm. ‘I worry about you.’

Something odd flickered and was gone. ‘Well, I worry about you. Just promise me you won’t go back to your aunt.’

‘I promise.’

Thomas moved around his box again, calling me back to the moment.

‘I haven’t thanked you.’

‘Yes, you have.’

I put my arms around him and hugged him as hard as I could. The first time I’d ever done that.

‘Thank you, Russell. Thank you so much. You don’t ... know what this means to me.’

He tensed and patted my shoulder awkwardly. I was embarrassing him, so I let go and stepped back.

‘Well, again, thank you.’

He turned quickly away and began hunting through the contents of a dusty cupboard.

‘Again, you’re welcome.’

I had my first riding lesson a couple of days later.

They marked out an area in our second field, with oil drums at each corner, marked A, B, C and, astonishingly, D. I could only assume this was for their benefit as I was already on nodding terms with the alphabet and Thomas probably couldn’t read. I wore a smart new safety hat, and with the aid of a box, climbed clumsily into the saddle. It was an awfully long way up. I could practically see the sea.

Boxer watched from over the hedge. Marilyn watched through the hedge and everyone else watched from the gate.

With Russell standing in the centre like a ringmaster, I walked Thomas from A to B, turned left at C, and walked him back to A and so on. Once I got used to the strangeness, it wasn’t too difficult. Then we trotted and I bumped gracelessly around like a – like a very graceless thing. We finished with a walk up the lane so I could show off to the Braithwaites. Their eight-year-old daughter, Fiona, was on her own pony, casually jumping fences that looked taller than me, watched by her proud parents. Everyone waved.

When we got home, I had to get my legs used to land again, and then I had to rub Thomas down under Russell’s watchful eye, pick out his feet – he lifted each one for me, such a gentleman – wash his bit, and clean the tack. It took three times as long as the actual ride and I was exhausted at the end of it. No wonder Russell was so thin.

But I was learning. I was actually learning to ride. And the day Russell

saddled up Boxer as well and we rode together up on the moors was one of the best days of my life. We went for miles, closing our ears to the anxious cries of a small donkey suffering separation anxiety, drifting up from the valley below.

She was in the yard when we got back. I suspect Mrs Crisp and Sharon had been playing with her in our absence, but this did not prevent her scolding us every inch of the way across the yard. We turned the two horses into the field where they immediately enjoyed a luxurious roll and while they were on their backs with their legs in the air, she had a go at them as well.

‘Does she not have a volume control?’ said Kevin, moving out of range.

Mrs Crisp, who’d vainly been trying to get a word in, mouthed a sentence at me. She tried again, just as Marilyn finally fell silent and the words, ‘So they’re on their way over,’ reverberated around the yard.

Russell stepped back. ‘Why are you yelling at me?’

What she would have done to him at this point was never established, because, with the inevitability of death and taxes, my relations were upon us.

‘Quick,’ muttered Russell, ‘Let me look at you.’

‘What?’

‘Are you injured at all? Bruised? Ill? Unhappy? Tired? Quick, tell me, so I can think of excuses.’

‘I’m fine,’ I said, trying not to laugh. ‘Just for once, you’re ... completely in the clear.’

Oh no he wasn’t.

I forgot to take my riding hat off.

They stopped dead as they took in the implication.

Aunt Julia opened her mouth.

Uncle Richard, with true heroism, spoke first.

‘My goodness, Jenny. Have you been riding?’

‘Yes,’ I said proudly. ‘I have my own horse.’

‘How exciting. May I see it? Julia, come and see Jenny’s horse.’

Fortunately, the horses had finished displaying their bellies and were both right side up, grazing quietly. They ignored the audience at the gate, but Marilyn bustled over to check them out.

For a second, we were a tableau of normality. The relatives admiring the niece’s birthday present. Then, sadly, the sound cut in.

‘Russell, are you deliberately trying to kill your wife?’

Well, now she’d come right out and said it.

‘I think we both know the answer to that one, Julia.’

‘Are you insane? The risk ... She’s not strong ... Richard, you can’t allow this to continue.’

‘Well, really, Julia, why is it such a bad thing? I assume she doesn’t go out alone, Russell?’

‘Not yet. And she doesn’t go out on the roads at all. Just up the lane on to the moors. It’s very quiet. You never see another soul. Apart from Martin

Braithwaite occasionally with his dogs. And certainly no traffic. And she's coming along very well, Richard. And the horse is extremely reliable. There's really nothing to worry about.'

Just for once, he was making a real effort to be conciliatory. He knew how much this meant to me and he wasn't going to let anyone take it away. I was truly grateful.

Thomas wandered over to see who these new people were. I stroked him. 'See, Aunt Julia, how gentle he is.'

She looked uncertainly at her husband. 'Richard ...'

I'll say this for Uncle Richard, he may channel mild-mannered Clark Kent, but when he spoke, Aunt Julia listened.

'My dear, I think you worry unnecessarily. This is a good thing for Jenny. She's learning responsibility. Russell, I know we must seem over-protective to you, but we remember when she was – not as well as she is these days.'

'Of course, sir. I understand, but you only have to look at the difference in her to see how beneficial this has been. I hope you will give her your blessing. She derives a great deal of enjoyment from her riding and your displeasure would certainly spoil it for her.'

They were all discussing me as if I wasn't there – as usual – but even as I thought this, Russell turned, and concealed from them, winked at me.

'Well, you may be right. But Jenny, please promise me you will not venture on to public highways.'

'I promise, Uncle Richard.'

'And you will take care.'

'Yes, I will take care. I only ever go up on the ... moor and follow the ... path. And Thomas is very safe.'

'Is that his name? Tell me about him?'

So I peeled off with Uncle Richard and talked about Thomas, while Russell, heroically, took Aunt Julia into the house, where, hopefully, she would be plied with refreshments and then go away.

Uncle Richard seemed in no hurry to follow them in, so we stayed outside in the sunshine, leaning on the gate. I remembered again, the night before I got married, how much I enjoyed talking to him. He told me about their holiday in Portugal, relating one or two little incidents.

'And I have to say, Jenny, how much your speech has improved. You still have the slight hesitation, but it is a joy to see how your confidence has grown. You know that I was a little concerned about your marriage, but I'm delighted to say I think I might have been wrong. He's not who I would have chosen, but there is no doubt, he's been good for you. And I think you've done him good, too, Jenny. I'm very happy to see the two of you making a go of it.'

I was very touched. 'Thank you, Uncle Richard.'

And I was very guilty. He was going to be upset when we divorced. And even more upset when I didn't return to live with them. But that was for the

future. I was beginning to adopt Russell's 'I'll think of something,' attitude.

'And now, I think,' he continued, in a conspiratorial whisper, 'we had better go and find our respective spouses. You can never be quite sure how long détente will last. We wouldn't want to put too much of a strain on goodwill, would we?'

They had brought my birthday present, with apologies for its lateness. Book tokens, which were always acceptable to me. In my pre-Russell days, I would spend weeks in the bookshop before making my choice. For me, with so much time to kill, that was the most important part of the present. The downside was that the bookshop belonged to Christopher and I had initially been reluctant to add to his profits, until it became painfully apparent to everyone that Christopher couldn't run a race, let alone a business, and that probably the bookshop had never made any sort of profit since the minute he first walked in through the door. I sometimes wondered how much it cost them to keep him afloat.

We waved them off, basking in goodwill and sunshine. Russell disappeared to his studio, and Kevin and I, armed with weapons of mass destruction, got stuck into the garden again.

That was pretty much how the whole summer went. I rode in the mornings with Russell and then when he went up to his studio, I attacked the garden. Sometimes Russell hung out of the window, shouting advice or criticism. Sometimes I told him to wind his neck in.

Kevin signed up for his course. Mrs Crisp seemed more focused and there was no more talk of her leaving. Sharon was putting a business plan together and Russell painted. He wasn't happy with most of it and once or twice, something came sailing out of the windows to land in the garden below, but on the whole we were a happy little bunch. I was beginning to enjoy my life but then time put on an unwanted burst of speed and suddenly it was autumn.

Kevin and I had cleared most of the garden. We'd kept one or two things, but most had been uprooted. Kevin, complaining loudly about his back, dug it over, and I, complaining loudly about the smell, wheeled over the manure heap and forked it in.

We'd found the fountain and scraped out the thick, black, stagnant contents. 'Good job we don't sleep together,' said Russell. 'It would be rude to kick you out of my bed, but I have to say, Jenny, you're a bit of a whiffy wife!' This from a man who smelled, in varying combinations, of horse, lemons, linseed oil, fabric conditioner, and beer. We filled it with water and were dismayed to find it empty again the next morning.

'You need a liner,' shouted Russell from his window. 'Don't bother trying to patch it with cement. That never works. Get a liner and then make a new edge with bricks. Something we can sit on. Hold on. I'm coming down.'

So for a week we had Russell leaping everywhere, but he knew what he was doing and at the end of it, we were drenched and dirty, but we had a waterproof basin with a smart new brick coping that could double as a seat. I

have to say they did most of the work but I was allowed to hold the hose.

Kevin found the hussy in one of the outhouses, mostly undamaged, although her clothes were still falling off. Russell patted her fondly.

‘Pervert,’ I said.

‘No, no. She formed an important part of my education.’

‘She’s deformed. It’s a ... miracle she can even stand up straight. No wonder her clothes are always falling off.’

‘Yeah,’ said Kevin, staring.

I left them trying to get her back on her plinth in the middle of the basin, manhandling her slightly more than I thought necessary.

Summery autumn slid slowly into wintry autumn. The leaves turned. We woke up to the odd frost. I’d been married nearly nine months. I was a veteran. Russell was trying to put together a body of work to show to local galleries. He grew tense and harassed and busy. I took to riding on my own.

‘Yes, of course you can,’ he said, not taking his eyes off the canvas in front of him. ‘Thomas has enough sense for both of you. Just always tell someone here and make sure you’re back before dusk. I mean that, Jenny. It all looks very different up there in the dark.’

I nodded. I didn’t go far the first time, but grew a little braver with each expedition. And there was a long, straight bit, just before Pen Tor where we could pick up speed as well.

I didn’t mean to have such an enormous row. He was tired and wound-up and I, conscious that time was ticking by, had got some property details and accidentally left them on the table. He went up like a rocket. I’ve no idea why. And then I went up too, because I was worried about my future and he slammed into his studio, shouting that if that was the way I felt, the sooner I left the better, and I said in that case I’d be gone by the end of the month, and he said good, and I said right then, and saddled up Thomas, told Kevin that I’d only be an hour, and set off at a brisk trot.

Once up on the moor I was in no mood to hang around. The day was crisp and cold and Thomas lengthened his stride. I leaned low over his neck, enjoying the wind in my face.

I opened my eyes to a darkening sky. The bleary lights resolved themselves into emerging stars. And it was very, very cold.

I lay on my back on hard ground, tried to lift my head, convulsed and threw up, but afterwards the pain in my head receded a little. Wiping my mouth, I rolled slowly on to my stomach, and, keeping my head as still as possible, tried to get up. My hip hurt and my arm and my shoulder. I’d fallen. Up here on the moor. How had that happened? A small sound made me turn. Thomas stood nearby, head hanging, his saddle slipping to one side.

I took a step towards him and vomited again, which was no fun, but again, I felt a little better. Afterwards, I could see more clearly. Clearly enough to make out the tangle of wire wrapped around his forelegs and the dark patches

of blood. Again, he made that small sound of distress.

My first instinct was to run home and get someone to help. This was serious. I didn't know what to do. But I couldn't do that. If I left him Thomas would try to follow me and fall again. I had a terrible picture of him, hobbled by the wire, trying to struggle after me as I left him behind. Crying in pain. Frightened and alone.

I needed to free him and I had to do it now. Before the light went completely. Focusing on my twenty-seven fingers, I sat in front of him and tried to find the end. As with the cat, I thought if I explained what I was doing then it would help to keep him calm. And me as well. The wire was very thin which was good because it was flexible and bad because it seemed to have cut his legs quite badly.

I was trying not to cry, because then I wouldn't be able to see at all and I didn't want to upset Thomas any further. And he was so good. He stood stock still while I worked. Initially I was grateful, but then I started to worry, wondering how badly was he hurt and whether he would even be able to move at all. If that was the case then I should have gone for help at once. While it was still light. I'd made the wrong decision. I'd got it wrong. I panicked, pulled at the wire, and he uttered a little whinny of pain.

I made myself slow down. It seemed to me that I'd loosened it sufficiently to be able, maybe, to lift his foot free.

Running my hand gently down his leg, I couldn't feel anything wrong and best of all, he didn't flinch, so I stood carefully, bent even more carefully, and lifted his foot. Bless him, he shifted his weight and let me. I pulled the wire away and did the same for the other foot and at last, he was free.

I just wanted to sling the wire as far away as possible, but that would be stupid so I coiled it and stuffed it into my pocket. Then I took off my coat because although I was cold, when I touched his ears, Thomas was even colder. I pulled off his saddle, left it lying, and laid my coat over his back.

'There you go,' I said, trying to sound cheerful. I tidied his forelock as I always did, stroked his nose, and looked around me.

Since I couldn't remember the accident, I wasn't exactly sure where I was on this featureless moorland. I worried I'd got turned around somehow. So easy to do. I was just off the path and there were rocky outcrops. I couldn't have come off in a worse place. It was a miracle I wasn't more badly hurt, but someone was looking out for me, that was for sure. There were a lot of rocks around and I'd managed to miss every single one of them.

Piecing things together, I remembered going through the gate, following the path, picking up speed – and then – nothing.

'What about you, Thomas?' I said. 'Any idea where we are?'

He lifted his head a little and again made the small noise that frightened me so much. I looked round. Night was coming. The sky was clear. The wind had dropped. It was cold and it was going to get colder. More faint stars appeared. Cold, hard chips of light. Like diamonds in the sky.

I took off his bridle to make him more comfortable – he would follow me without it.

At least, he would if I could get him moving. Not surprisingly, he was reluctant to try. I put my hand under his chin, made the chirping sound I used to encourage him, and said firmly, ‘Come on, Thomas.’ It was important that at least one of us looked and sounded as if we knew what we were doing. I stepped forward as if I took it for granted he would follow.

He took one careful step and then another.

‘Good boy,’ I said and his ears twitched. ‘And another step for me, there’s a good boy.’

It hurt him and he was reluctant to move, but he followed me. My heart swelled with love and gratitude. He trusted me. No one had ever trusted me before. I hoped he didn’t think I knew the way home, because I was lost. I had no idea where we were. I was in pain. My head throbbed. My vision came and went. And I was cold. Cold to the bone. I shivered violently, although that might have been shock. I let Thomas choose the way. I rested a hand on his neck, leaned on him occasionally and told him we were nearly home.

We picked our way out of the rocks and reached the path. I looked left into the gathering gloom. I looked right into the same gathering gloom. Thomas turned right.

‘Clever boy,’ I said and we started again. So slowly, but neither of us was in any condition to hurry which was unfortunate because I was growing colder by the minute. I started to shiver and seriously thought about taking my coat back, but poor Thomas looked so shocked and frightened, and he was my responsibility. He was my horse, and it was up to me to get him home. To get us both back home. There was no one else. I had to do this.

‘It’s up to me,’ I told him and the words beat out a little rhythm in my mind in time with our steps. Up to me. Up to me.

I was just beginning to think we didn’t have far to go after all, when he stopped dead and refused to take another step.

‘No,’ I said, panicking because we were so close now. ‘You mustn’t stop, Thomas. You must keep walking. Come on, now, there’s my good boy. Just a little further.’

But he wouldn’t move.

I tried everything. I coaxed, I commanded, I shouted, I cried, I pleaded. Nothing. He stood as still as stone. And as silent. And eventually, so was I. I stared helplessly. I couldn’t carry him and I wasn’t going to leave him, so I did the only thing I could and sat down.

It was now almost completely dark. I put my aching head in my hands and listened to the surrounding silence.

No I didn’t. I could hear water. Water, trickling and gurgling not too far from us. I clambered to my feet, said to Thomas, ‘Stay here,’ as if he wouldn’t anyway, but it gave me the illusion of control, and headed towards the sound.

I could see the stream, catching the starlight as it bounced over the rocks.

And then, then I remembered Russell's words so long ago. 'If you get lost then find water and follow it down.'

Unfortunately, it was too dark to see which way the water was flowing, but I found an old tissue in my pocket, tossed it in and watched the light blob swirl away to my left.

We were going the wrong way.

All that painful effort and we were going the wrong way. I nearly sat down and cried. How stupid was I? I should have stayed put and waited to be found. Other people always knew what to do. Why was I so –?

And then I thought – not stupid at all. I'd followed Thomas who had brought me here to this stream and if we followed it down, we'd get off the moor and to safety. Probably much more quickly than if we'd followed the path. Which would be hard to make out in the dark. I'd trusted him and now he trusted me to get us home.

And I would. I splashed my face with water, and took a little in cupped hands for him.

'Come on, sunshine,' I said, cheerfully. 'You and I are much too clever to die up here. Let's get back and tell them our adventures, shall we?'

So we followed the stream down. The way was rougher, so we took it very slowly. I kept a hand on Thomas the whole time. I told him about my childhood. About school. About my aunt and uncle. I told him about Francesca. I told him about Russell – that took a long time. Occasionally, his ears twitched towards me. He was listening.

'We're going to do this,' I told him. 'We are going to get home. And you, my clever friend, will have a warm stable, a special treat, and a story to tell the other two. We will do this, Thomas. We will get home. I promise you.'

But it was very dark now. There were no lights anywhere. A bitter wind blew over the empty loneliness. There was no moon yet. I had no torch. And I was frozen. I stuffed my hands in my armpits and pulled up my hood. It didn't help.

Now I had to decide whether to risk injury by stumbling on in the dark or sit and wait here for possible rescue. If we kept moving one of us might fall again and this time there would be no getting up. But if we stayed put, we'd freeze.

Thomas took the decision out of my hands. He stopped. There was a finality about it. This time I knew he could go no further.

I had no thought of leaving him. That was never going to happen. Well, at least this solved the problem of what I was going to do when I left Russell. Moulder in a grave was the answer to that one. Still, it worked out well for him. He'd get the money and the house.

I pulled my coat an inch or two higher on his withers. His head hung lower than ever. I rubbed the spot behind his ears with icy hands.

'Please, Thomas,' I whispered. 'Could you not manage just a little further?'

Suddenly, he lifted his head. His nostrils flared. He pricked his ears, flung

up his head and whinnied, long and loud. And then, exhausted, he dropped his head again.

In the distance, I heard a shout. Whistles blew. Engines started. Headlights appeared over the hill, cutting great swathes through the darkness.

‘It’s the cavalry,’ I told him. ‘Don’t give up now. They’re coming, Thomas. They’ve found us. We’ll soon be home.’

Now the tears did flow.

And over all the racket, down in the valley, I could hear a little donkey calling us home.

Chapter Thirteen

Subsequent events are a little blurred in my mind. I know I refused to go to hospital until I saw Thomas safely into his box. After that, Russell swept me away and we pulled into the hospital car park, clattering like an old sewing machine. There was a lot of shouting – from Russell, obviously. I just closed my eyes and let them all get on with it.

Everyone was very kind, but I soon discovered that if I opened my eyes then lots of people wanted to talk to me about lots of things, so it seemed better for everyone if I just lay quietly with my eyes shut, so I did.

I used the time to think.

I thought about what had just happened. I thought about our dinner party. Russell had been at the other end of the table. Not exactly miles away, but certainly I had been out of his reach. Then I thought about Kevin upsetting the water jug and the ensuing confusion. Everyone lifted up plates and glasses while things were mopped up. It would have been easy to slip something in a glass – any glass – and then put that glass in front of me when the table was put back together. We were all drinking the same wine and, in the state I was in, I certainly wouldn't have noticed. It would have been easy. And if Kevin hadn't knocked over the water some other opportunity would have occurred, I was sure.

I thought about falling down the stairs. I remembered my foot, sliding away from me and my frantic grab for the banisters. I remembered the sickening impact as I fell backwards. It was a miracle I hadn't cracked my head open. And so I would have if the little pool of oil had been spilled on a lower stair. My head would have crashed back onto the bare wooden staircase and at the speed I was going, it would have been nasty.

Just two normal household incidents. A stomach upset and falling down the stairs. Both easily explained away.

But this – this was different. This was a tangle of wire left across a path where I rode. And not just me. It was Thomas too. My precious Thomas, who had looked to me to get us home and who stood so patiently while I untangled that filthy wire with cold, shaking fingers.

Yes, this last incident was very different. An escalation. Much more difficult to explain away. Especially since I'd kept the wire.

The question was, what was I going to do about it? Love and loyalty can only take you so far. The safest place for me would apparently be Uncle Richard's house. Aunt Julia would ostentatiously throw a Total Exclusion Zone of about a hundred miles around the house and Russell Checkland wouldn't be allowed anywhere near me. Ever again. And if Russell was far away then I would seem to be safe. But that really wasn't what I wanted. That wouldn't solve anything. And it wasn't just me any more.

More than ever, I missed big, golden Thomas, who would have stood beside the bed, swishing his tail and who would certainly have had something to say about all this. But he'd gone. He'd left me. Because, supposedly, I was grown-up now and able to deal with this on my own. I wondered if he'd foreseen all this. Of course he had. Yet, still he'd left me. Because he thought I could do this by myself. So I'd better get on with it then.

They let me go the next day. Russell went charging off to bring the car to the patient loading bay and I was awaiting his return. The doctor, whose name I have now forgotten, came to stand alongside me.

'You take care now, Mrs Checkland.'

'I will. Thanks for everything. I appreciate it.'

We both watched Russell pull up on double yellow lines and smile blindingly at the parking attendant.

'Yes,' she said, in amusement. 'Do you think he's disastrously charming or just charmingly disastrous?'

What I would have said to this was never known, because the subject of the conversation was suddenly with us, grabbing my bag, thanking the doctor and whirling me away before I could properly gather what passed for my wits these days.

Russell chattered all the way home, but drove (comparatively) slowly back to Frogmorton, where I ignored his instructions and went straight to see Thomas.

Poor old Thomas. The sight of him brought home to me the seriousness of what had happened in a way that my own injuries hadn't. They'd piled up his bedding and he was well rugged, but he still looked cold and miserable. His head hung low and his eyes were half-closed.

'Thomas?'

He lifted his head and made a little sound of greeting that nearly had me in tears. But he didn't move towards me. I stared anxiously.

'Which part of go straight into the house and keep warm didn't you understand? Why won't you do as I tell you? I swear you are the most troublesome wife I've ever had,' said Russell, materialising unnervingly beside me.

'Well, never mind. Not much longer now.'

Was there the slightest pause?

'No. No, as you say, not much longer now.'

The silence thickened.

'What does Andrew say?'

'Andrew says he'll be fine in a week or so. Stop changing the subject.'

'What subject?'

'Us. Our future. What we're going to do.'

I remembered that arguing about our future was what had sent me flying out of the house in the first place.

'Cheer up, Russell. If this ... keeps up, I'm not going to have much of a

future. I'll probably be struck by lightning next Tuesday and all your troubles will be over.'

He stepped back, suddenly very tight around the mouth.

'What?'

'If anything happens to me while we're still married then you get everything. House. Money. Francesca, if you still ... want her. Everything.'

He grew, if anything, even tighter. I braced myself.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that you need to be very, very careful, Russell. I've worked out what's going on. You know what I'm talking about.'

'How long have you known?'

I pulled out the coil of wire and laid it gently on the table in front of him. He stared at it, picked it up, turned it over, and laid it back down again. His eyes were very watchful.

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing. I don't want anyone else involved in this. There's enough gossip about us already. I think, and I'm sure you will agree, that this was one "accident" too many. I don't think there will be any more of them now. If you think about it carefully, I'm sure you will agree.'

He picked up the wire again, seemingly unable to leave it alone.

'I do.'

'As things stand at the moment, you're in much more danger from them than I am.'

'Well,' he said lightly, balancing the coil of wire on the palm of his hand, 'we'd better make sure nothing happens to you then, hadn't we? Now for heaven's sake, come inside and let Mrs Crisp start looking after you.'

They were so pleased to see me. I couldn't believe it. Mrs Crisp forgot my bruises, hugged me tightly, apologised, and hugged me again. She was warm and soft and smelled of sherry.

Sharon, remembering my bruises, hugged me not so tightly. She was warm and soft and smelled of vanilla.

Kevin shook my hand in a very manly way, so I hugged him anyway. He smelled of horses.

The cat unwound himself from the range, jumped into my arms, and head-butted me. He smelled of tinned salmon.

'Bloody animal,' said Russell. 'Every time I go near him he bites me. I don't know why he's still here, Jenny. I gave particular instructions he was to be shown the door. Why does no one ever take any notice of anything I say? You lot do realise you work for me, don't you?'

His workforce regarded him stoically. He changed the subject.

'I'm hungry.'

They left us to have a quiet meal together. Afterwards I snoozed on the sofa and he went out. I woke up hours later, just in time to go to bed.

Of course, having slept most of the day, I was restless and couldn't get off

again. The painkillers had worn off and the ibuprofen they'd given me really wasn't cutting the mustard. I shifted painfully around the bed, and, unable to get comfortable, picked up a book.

I heard Russell come home, heard him clumping quietly (for him) up the stairs, and heard his footsteps along the passage. He must have seen the light under my door, because he paused and then tapped.

'Jenny?'

He stuck his head around the door. 'Everything all right?'

I nodded. 'Not sleepy.'

'Do you want some tea? I've got something to show you.'

I nodded and he disappeared, coming back with a tray containing the wrong mugs, the leaky teapot, no spoons, and a photo album. He dropped the whole lot on the table, poured out two mugs and made himself comfortable on the bed.

'Move over a bit.'

I shunted over and he stretched out beside me.

'Don't spill it. Here you are. Good God, what's the matter with your feet?'

'The cat.'

'He sleeps in here?'

'Absolutely not. Never. At all.'

'Well, if you catch some dreadful disease and your feet fall off, don't come running to me.'

I promised I wouldn't.

We sipped tea together, just like a normal married couple.

'So what have you got for me?'

'Oh. Yes. Andrew dug this out the other day. There's something in here I think will interest you.' He began to leaf through. 'Yes, here we are.'

He passed over a very elderly photo album.

'That's our garden.'

'Yes, these were taken in my grandfather's time. I never knew him, but I thought you'd like to see what the garden used to look like. The photos are black and white, but you'll get the idea.'

It had been beautiful. Roses, lavender, geraniums, stocks, foxgloves, lupins, and many more that I couldn't name spilled untidily over gravel paths. Looking at it, you could hear the lazily droning bees and feel the summer sun beating down. In the centre of her fountain, the hussy clutched her clothes in vain.

'And,' he said, setting down his tea and taking the book off me. 'Recognise anyone here?'

He passed it back. I saw a very old photo of four children sitting on the grass. Christopher glowered from the background. Francesca and Russell sat at the front, smiling at each other. She was making a daisy chain. I was off to one side, staring out of the picture, in my own world as usual.

'I don't remember this.'

‘Me neither, but that’s us. You’ve got short hair so you’re what ten, eleven?’

I nodded.

‘And there’s another.’

He turned the page. And there we were, just the two of us. Russell was holding a bucket and I was peering in.

‘Even then with the buckets,’ he said. ‘An omen.’

It was an effort to smile. I looked at my younger self, sighed, and gently closed the book. He put it on the floor. And his mug. And my mug.

‘Jenny. I’m just going to come right out and say this. I’d rather kick myself for being an insensitive idiot now than kick myself in years to come for not saying what I ... The thing is, I don’t want you to go. I would be very pleased and proud and – honoured – if you would stay. I know the last months have been pretty bad for you, but I think we’re both agreed that’s finished now. I don’t care about the money. Leave it to the cat for all I care. You can do the garden, fix up the house, learn to cook, ride with me, do the accounts, scrape egg off the walls, bring home dodgy livestock – what woman could resist such a lifestyle?’

Well not this one, certainly. I really didn’t want to go. I thought of what I would leave behind. But if I stayed – and there was another accident – and they took Russell away – what then? I knew what people said about him. Had always said about him. He was his own worst enemy.

I sighed with the weight of it all. I really wanted to stay. The situation was not beyond recall. Take a chance. Take a chance and stay.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’d like to stay.’

He squeezed my hand, very tightly. ‘That’s my girl.’

To overcome the embarrassment of the moment, I leaned back against the pillows and found his arm there. He made no attempt to move it.

‘I’m going to push my luck, now.’

Of course he was. When wouldn’t he?

‘I’d like to stay, too.’

I didn’t get it to begin with. Then I did. Or I thought I did. Maybe I was wrong. My heart began to thump. Was he saying ...?

‘If you want me to leave, then I will. But I warn you, I’ll be back tomorrow night and the night after, until one day, Jenny ... We know each other a little better now and the last weeks have been ... difficult for me. I rather hoped ... but if you don’t want ... I mean I’ll quite understand. Just say no and I’ll ...’ he sighed heavily and continued in a voice that led me to believe he was labouring under some huge, dark, nameless sorrow. ‘... I’ll drag myself back to my own room, trying not to think of you, here, soft and warm, without me ... Because I’ll be next door, all alone, cruelly abandoned to the dubious pleasures of night-time manipulation and potential blindness. So no pressure then, Jenny.’

Trying not to laugh, I buried my head in his shoulder.

‘Is that a yes? I know I’m a Checkland, and we like a challenge, but I need more to work with than just the top of your head. Look at me. That’s better. Now there’s no cause for alarm. In the last ten seconds, I’ve thought all this over very carefully indeed, and for the purposes of this exercise, I propose we divide into two groups: the kisser and the kissee. You, Jenny, are the kissee and all you have to do is stare up at me with your disturbingly trustful eyes. Yes, that’s very good. The kisser, that’s me, by the way, takes a deep breath, tries to remember who he is, lifts the kissee’s chin gently, like so, and has at it.’

‘Has at it?’

‘Yes. The kisser, having set the scene to his satisfaction, now makes his move.’

He bent his head and kissed me, very gently. For a long time. His lips were warm and soft. My head swam. I put it down to concussion.

I wondered, briefly, whether he felt the same. It seemed unlikely. For all I knew, he did this every day of the week.

After a while, I opened my eyes. He watched me carefully, a small smile on his face, but the fingers pushing back my hair were trembling slightly.

‘Mastering his relief that the kissee has not leaped screaming from the bed or walloped him over the head with the bedside lamp, the kisser, slightly unsure which planet he’s on, makes his next move.’

He kissed me again. It was even better the second time around. I assumed I was getting the hang of it.

‘At this point, the sensitive and considerate kisser enquires, not without misgivings, whether the kissee is all right.’

Being speechless, the kissee nodded.

He pulled me closer and I could feel the heat of his body through the bedclothes.

‘So now, the kisser ...’

The kissee pulled up his T-shirt and ran her hands down his long back.

That shut the kisser up for a bit, although he seemed pleased.

‘What was that?’

I grinned at him. ‘Feedback.’

He laughed and nuzzled my neck, and large numbers of neurons shut down, the better to concentrate on other, more important things.

‘The kisser is enormously grateful for said feedback. Now, brace yourself. That’s called foreplay, by the way. Very important. Apparently, women set great store by it.’

While he was talking, he unbuttoned my pyjamas and gently, very gently, slipped in his warm hand.

I shivered.

‘Cold?’

‘No.’

‘Scared?’

‘No.’

‘Appreciative?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Hmmm. The kisser, slightly disappointed at the response to one of his best moves now tries this – and this – and especially – this.’

I shuddered.

‘The kisser would like to say that sudden loss of speech in the kissee is perfectly normal at this stage, Should the kissee wish to express her appreciation, she can fill out a customer comments card later.’

He had wonderful hands. Those long, thin, bony fingers were moving all over me, gentle, assured and quite magical.

I shuddered again.

He laughed, softly.

‘Having reduced the kissee to incoherence, the kisser now moves in again, reminding the kissee that she can stop any time she likes. Even if that does mean the kisser’s head will probably fall off.’

‘No big loss, then.’

‘For that remark, the kissee can expect no mercy.’

He tugged gently at my pyjama bottoms.

‘Is that – are those – There are pink cows on your pyjamas. What is it with you, pyjamas, and farmyard animals?’

‘If you don’t like them, you can remove ...’

My bottoms flew across the room.

‘So, do you like this?’

My whole body jolted and for a moment ...

‘The kisser takes a moment for a complacent smirk.’

He did it again and I slowly began to melt. I clutched at him, feeling control of my own body slowly sliding away. Unaccustomed heat swept through me. I could hear my own heart pulsing in time with his hands. And what they were doing. Things began to slide away from me. I made a tiny sound. Whether of apprehension or appreciation, even I didn’t know.

‘It’s all right,’ he said into my hair. ‘It’s all right, Jenny, I promise you. Close your eyes.’

His hands swept over me again, touching, stroking. I was just melting away. He laughed again and I suddenly thought – I have hands, too.

I fumbled inexpertly with his zip and he had to do it for me.

I reached down.

‘Oh!’

His eyes flew open in alarm. ‘What? What’s wrong? What’s the matter?’

‘I’m going to need a bigger hand.’

‘Jenny, you ... wretched girl. Just for that ...’

The kissee became incapable of coherent thought for a few moments.

‘Russell.’

‘Yes, love?’

‘I don’t know ... show me what to do.’

He kissed me and guided my hand. ‘Like this. Oh God, yes. Just like that.’ He buried his head in my hair and groaned.

The kissee smirked complacently.

His hands found places I didn’t even know I had. That someone who moved so quickly and so noisily should have such quiet, slow hands was amazing. And what he did with them was even more amazing. I felt a rhythm build in time with my own frantic heartbeats. My body began to move of its own accord. I couldn’t bear the pleasure.

‘Russell, what’s happening?’

His voice was ragged. ‘I don’t know. Don’t stop.’

For a moment, everything in the universe was very still and then I toppled straight over the edge.

A minute later, so did he.

With a thump, the cat fell off the bed.

Russell curled himself around me and I smiled happily to myself.

‘I won’t be here when you wake up tomorrow,’ he whispered. ‘But I’ll be back. That was just the nursery slopes, Jenny. Tomorrow – tomorrow, we go off piste.’

I didn’t bounce out of bed the next morning, because with that amount of bruising, bouncing doesn’t happen, but I hobbled exuberantly downstairs to discover it was nearly lunchtime.

I struggled into a smelly old coat, shoved my feet into wellies, and stumped through the rain to see Thomas.

I had to greet Marilyn first or she would have had the partition down. I gave her a carrot to keep her quiet and turned to Thomas, who looked better. He dropped his head to mine. I said, ‘Thomas,’ very softly and stroked his nose. He made that small noise again and blew gently in my hair. I laid my head against his and breathed in his warm horse smell. We stood together a long time.

We were still standing together when Russell came back from wherever he’d been and dragged me in for lunch. We all ate together around the kitchen table. Occasionally, he caught my eye. I tried not to blush. Once, I saw Mrs Crisp looking at us, and then I did blush.

Eventually, when he’d eaten everything in sight, he announced he was off to his studio.

‘Are you coming, Jenny?’

‘Yes,’ I said, surprised and pleased he wanted me in there when he was working.

I followed him in with his coffee and was again staggered at the difference in the place.

A number of canvases, in varying stages of completion, were scattered all over. I saw colour and movement and light. I saw more pizza boxes and more beer bottles as well. The place was chaos, but creative chaos.

I cleared a space on his battered old sofa and pulled the ancient throw across my legs. Rain hammered hard on the windows, but inside was warm and peaceful. He'd changed into paint-encrusted T-shirt and jeans and was squeezing tubes and muttering to himself, lost in his own world.

I made myself comfortable and prepared to watch a genius at work. I don't know about other geniuses, but this one worked with enormous energy, scrubbing the paint into the canvas, stepping back, muttering, lunging forward again, stabbing with his brush, rubbing the paint with his fingers, singing odd bits of song – he was never still. I felt tired just watching him. He had obviously completely forgotten about me, so I curled up under the throw, nursed my coffee, and remembered some things from last night. His hand, my hands – what I'd done with them, where they'd been ... I'd just finished an action replay of one of my favourite bits when I became aware that silence had fallen. I looked up to find him watching me.

'What are you thinking about?'

I blushed. 'I ... um ... I ...'

'No, you're not starting that again. Spit it out, wife.'

I tried to marshal some words, but none seemed willing to put themselves forward.

'Well, while you're unable to criticise, come and have a look at this.'

This was an honour. He was obviously making a huge effort today. And if he could, then so could I.

I walked around behind his easel. Whatever he'd been painting had been abandoned and left propped against the wall. Facing me was a vivid, charcoal sketch. I was looking at myself. But not as I'd ever seen myself before.

The sketch looked back at me, quietly enigmatic around the mouth, then you looked at the eyes, heavy lidded, and far away, looking backwards, and what they were seeing was very, very obvious. My hair curled around my face in a way it rarely did in real life and my bare shoulders were indicated with just a few swift strokes. It was an intimate, personal portrait from someone who saw me very differently from the way I saw myself.

I reached out slowly, stopping just short of touching the paper, as if by following his outlines with my fingers in the air I could somehow capture what he had put on paper and absorb it into myself.

I looked at this other me and this other me looked back.

It took me several efforts, but he stood patiently, wiping his hands clean.

'Is this ...? How ...? Do you ...?'

It really is a good idea to decide what you want to say before you start. Or, as Thomas would have said, '*Engage brain before opening mouth.*'

'Do you like it?'

I caught a faint note of anxiety. This was Russell Checkland, the returning artist, still slightly unsure of himself.

'Yes, very much. I didn't know ... I just ...'

'Just a quick word of advice, Jenny. If you're going to sit thinking sexy

thoughts – and feel free to at any time – then please make sure it’s only me in the room.’

‘You don’t know that ...’

‘Idiot. You might as well put up a neon sign.’

‘No, you’re wrong. I was thinking about – the cat.’

We both turned to look at the cat who had somehow materialised belly up on the sofa. I’ve no idea how he got through the door. Osmosis, presumably.

He folded his arms and gave me that complacent Checkland grin.

‘The cat?’

‘Yes.’

I stared at him, defiantly. He stared back. And kept on staring. And on. The moment when I should have looked away passed away unnoticed. I couldn’t seem to get enough air in my lungs. The silence thickened and twisted into something else. I could hear my own heart pounding. Suddenly, I knew why Thomas had left me. Clever Thomas, who always saw more than I did.

I thought of last night. This was different. Last night had been white chocolate. Mild. Sweet. For beginners. This was the real deal. Dark chocolate. Thick and strong. For adults only. Addictive and dangerous.

I don’t know why he had laughed at me. He might as well have had a neon sign over his head too. In a flash, everything changed. Suddenly, I was in new and dangerous territory and I didn’t give a damn. I flew at him. He grabbed me. We crashed together. Our first kiss was in no way related to the gentle fun of last night. He went for me like a drowning man gasping for air.

I pulled his T-shirt over his head and he kicked off his jeans. He was hot and hard all over. His hands were everywhere. Not gentle and slow and patient like last night, but heavy and demanding. Clothes flew across the room. He knelt before me, unzipped my jeans, and gently pulled them down. I braced one hand on his shoulder and the other against the wall. Last night, I’d learned what hands could do, but this ... My knees sagged. He caught me and we fell to the floor together. From somewhere – heaven knows where – he found a condom and ripped open the packet. Against the patter of rain and the soft hiss of the gas fire, I could hear only my own heartbeat and his jagged breathing.

He pushed my legs apart with his knee, whispered, ‘If you’re not sure then you have to say now, because in a moment, I’m going to be unstoppable. Like a runaway train.’

‘That’s my Russell – the little engine that could.’

I could see laughter in his eyes. ‘One day we must talk about inappropriate humour.’

‘We could do it now, if you like.’

‘Believe me, wife, in ten seconds, you won’t be able to talk at all, and this time, for all the right reasons.’

He knew what this moment meant. And not just for me. I could feel him, wound as tight as a drum.

‘Ready?’

‘Yes, yes.’

His mouth came down on mine. All my senses slid sideways in anticipation. I could feel him nudging against me. I stood on the brink ...

Kevin knocked at the door.

‘Mr Checkland?’

Everything stopped dead.

Russell uttered a milk-curdling curse and then said, in a commendably normal voice. ‘What is it, Kevin. I’m quite busy in here.’

‘Mrs Kingdom is here.’

‘What? Don’t just stand there. You know the drill. Lock the doors. Turn out the lights. Everyone on the floor under the kitchen table and pretend we’re out.’

A pause.

‘Good afternoon, Russell,’ said Aunt Julia on the other side of the door.

I try to be a good wife. Sadly ...

I convulsed, curling into a tight ball, hands over my face, shaking with stifled laughter.

Having ascertained that no help whatsoever could be expected from the wife of his bosom, Russell sighed and let his head hang for a moment.

‘Good afternoon, Julia.’

‘There is no need for any special effort from you, Russell. It’s Jenny we’ve come to see. Where is she?’

Underneath her husband was the answer to that one. I waited with interest to see would he would say.

‘She’s lying down, Julia.’

True enough.

‘Nevertheless ...’ and she was using her special voice.

He sighed again and rolled off me. The afternoon felt suddenly chilly.

‘Kevin, take Mrs Kingdom downstairs, please. I’ll see if Jenny’s up to receiving visitors.’

‘Thank you, Russell. And to make things easier for everyone, I shall not depart until I have seen her. I think we both know what that means.’

Their footsteps retreated down the stairs.

Russell sighed heavily. ‘Sorry, Jenny. There’s something about knowing she’s only ten feet away ... Stop laughing and get your clothes on.’

It’s much more embarrassing putting your clothes back on again. He wiped away a few charcoal smudges from some surprising places and eventually, I was fit for inspection.

He seemed distracted. He was certainly thinking about something else and I was just in time to stop him going downstairs with his T-shirt inside out and back to front.

He paused at the top of the stairs and turned to me as if to say something. I always remember that moment. Whatever it was never got said. He gasped

my wrist and we made our way downstairs. And yes, Francesca was there too, because things just weren't bad enough without her. She looked tall and stunning. I did not have that just-ravished glow. I had no idea what was about to happen. I'd like to say some sort of instinct warned me, but it didn't. I had no idea my world was about to end.

Russell sat me down and wandered off into the kitchen.

Aunt Julia, as usual, wasted no time. 'Jenny, I want you to pack a bag and come back with me, please. Francesca will help.'

This was obviously news to Francesca who looked less than delighted – about the packing, I assumed, not me leaving Russell.

'No, thank you, Aunt Julia. I'm fine here.'

'How can you say that? I told you that animal was dangerous. I told you something like this would happen. *Jenny, you've been hospitalised.*'

Oh God, she was starting to talk in italics. That was never good. I tried to think of something soothing. Not that I was sure I'd be able to get it out.

It didn't matter. Russell returned and added his contribution to the discussion.

'Maybe you should think about it, Jenny. I'm sick to death of your family turning up and bitching every time you break a fingernail. I'm trying to work here, and I'm sick of the sight and sound of them.'

That brought the conversation to an emergency halt and while everyone was working out an appropriate response, the telephone rang and Mrs Crisp wheeled in a proper tea trolley. Cups, saucers, sugar tongs, the lot.

Russell went to help her. 'Jenny, can you get the phone?'

Aunt Julia made a supreme effort to speak calmly. 'Jenny finds it difficult to speak on the telephone.'

'Speak into the end with the holes, wife.'

I pulled a face – which hurt – lifted the phone, took a deep breath and said, 'Hello?'

Daniel Palmer said, 'Oh good, it's you, Jenny.'

I managed, 'Hello, Daniel,' and felt quite proud.

'Look, I've got some exciting news. You remember that idea we discussed? Ages ago. About Elizabeth Tudor and Mary Stuart? Well, it looks like it might be a goer. Can we get together sometime? To talk about it? If you want to, that is.'

Everything else flew right out of my head.

'Yes, yes, I'd love to. That is so –' and stopped, because I couldn't think of a word.

'Exciting,' he finished for me, laughing. 'So, when and where?'

'Well, I'm only just out of hospital ...'

'Oh God, I forgot. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I just wanted to tell you ...'

'No, it's fine. Could you come to dinner? ... Tomorrow night?' I glanced at Mrs Crisp, who nodded.

'Yes, I can. At least, I think I can. I'll have to check with Francesca.'

‘She’s right here,’ I said, glad to be able to drop her in it. ‘Just a minute.’

I passed the phone to Francesca who was only about six inches away and obviously dying to know why her husband wanted to talk to me, of all people.

I left her to it and joined Aunt Julia at the window. Obviously unwilling to be left anywhere near Russell Checkland in case she caught something, she was studying his plan of our garden.

‘This is pretty,’ she said, the words possibly choking her, but determined to give credit where it was due.

‘Russell did it. That’s how the garden will look,’ I said, turning it so it oriented with the view through the French doors. ‘Roses, peonies, foxgloves, geraniums – all the summer flowers – with hundreds of daffodils in the spring and lots of autumn colour too.’

‘It will be a lot of work,’ she said, severely, no doubt thinking of her own immaculate and never-changing heather and conifer desolation.

‘Come and drink your tea before it gets cold,’ said Russell and we all trooped back and sat down. Francesca nodded at me – the dinner was on. I wondered when she last actually spoke to me and couldn’t remember.

I told Mrs Crisp there would be an extra two for dinner tomorrow and picked up my cup and saucer.

My recollection is that everything happened in slow motion and in enormous detail, but of course, that couldn’t be so.

I sat back with my tea and from behind me, Mrs Crisp reached over my shoulder, said, ‘You don’t want to drink that, madam. It’s cold,’ took it off me and carried it out of the room.

I didn’t get it. I didn’t get it at all. I sat staring at the place where my tea had been and could think of nothing more useful than – she called me madam.

And then I got it. People say their world came tumbling down but mine was ripped apart. Much more sudden and much more painful. I realised suddenly what she’d done and why. I looked across at Russell, sitting opposite, who returned my stare with an expression of stone. The laughing magic of last night, this afternoon, this last nine months might never have happened.

The realisation hit me like a train. It was Russell. It had been Russell all along. I’d got it completely wrong. I thought I was so clever and I was wrong. I thought I had it all worked out – that it had been them, but I had been wrong. I really was as stupid as everyone thought I was. I’d been so proud of myself. And I was wrong, wrong, wrong. With no Thomas to guide me, I’d got it all – everything – completely and totally wrong. I was stupid after all. Stupid enough to believe ... Stupid, stupid, Jenny Dove.

I slowly came back to the real world to find I wasn’t the only one sitting like a frozen statue.

Aunt Julia stared at me in genuine horror. Her hand covered her mouth. Her eyes wide in shock and alarm. I’ll never forget the expression on her face. Slowly, she dragged her eyes from me to Russell.

Who hadn’t moved either. He still looked at me. Even when Aunt Julia

breathed, 'Russell,' his gaze never faltered. I looked in vain for some emotion from him, annoyance, anger, fear even. I waited for him to speak. To defend himself. To do something. Anything. The whole universe had stopped. No sound. No movement. Everything waited on Russell Checkland.

Francesca hurriedly put down her tea and pushed it away from her, seeking to distance herself from it and him.

Her movement broke the spell. He stood up suddenly and without a word, left the room. I heard him speak to Mrs Crisp in the kitchen. I heard his Land Rover start up. I heard him roar off down the lane and then he was gone.

Chapter Fourteen

I couldn't push past it. The same words clattered around inside my head. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't even think properly. I know people spoke to me, but their voices were lost before they reached me. I withdrew into a close, tight little world. The place where I lived before Thomas came. Where I was safe.

I didn't move all afternoon. I stared at the fire and thought about how stupid I'd been. How stupid I was. Stupid and wrong. And conceited too. How could I think that anyone as handsome, charming, or gifted as Russell Checkland would even look at someone like me? How easily had he talked me into marriage and talked me out of divorce. And just to reinforce his control over stupid Jenny Dove, a little casual sex, just because he could. Just to make her worship him a little more than she already did. I stared unseeingly as hot, humiliating, soul-searing shame rolled over me in waves when I thought about how easy I'd made things for him.

Every now and then, my brain made a tiny effort to get to grips – to try and work things out – but always, always, I saw that arm come over my shoulder. To take away my tea and end the stupid fool's paradise in which I had immersed myself.

It was Russell. It had always been Russell. Russell had slipped something into my tea while everyone was away talking on the phone or looking out of the window. And if Mrs Crisp's conscience hadn't got the better of her ... Mrs Crisp, who maybe didn't want to be responsible for the death of another Mrs Checkland.

I don't know how she got rid of my aunt, but she did. I think Aunt Julia couldn't wait to get away. If she'd told me again to pack a bag and go with her then I would probably have done so. But she wasn't given the opportunity. Mrs Crisp had the pair of them out of the door barely minutes after Russell had left.

They never left me alone for a second. Mrs Crisp brought in her cookery books and sat at the table putting together a menu for tomorrow night. I didn't know why she was bothering. After she'd gone, Sharon came in and pretended to dust. Then Kevin, sitting at the table by the window, quietly reading a book. Then Mrs Crisp again with an omelette. Then Sharon with a cup of tea. Then I went to bed. Then I got up to let the cat in. Then I lay awake for most of the night, desolate and empty, listening to the clock downstairs chiming the night away.

Russell didn't come home. I wondered if he ever would again. Maybe he would just keep going and never come back. I'd live here for a few weeks longer and then my aunt and uncle would swoop down, pack everything up,

and back I'd go. As if the last nine months had never happened.

I found I didn't care.

The next morning was awful. Everyone seemed to have made a pact to carry on as if nothing had happened. At breakfast, Mrs Crisp showed me her proposed menu: smoked salmon pâté, my favourite lamb and apricot stew, and lemon tart. I nodded. She could have said stewed mud and sawdust and I would still have nodded.

They kept me busy. I turned Boxer and Marilyn out into their field, spent some time with Thomas, polished glasses and cutlery, and helped lay the table. We were eating in the big, dreary dining-room. It seemed appropriate. Mid-morning, the phone rang. Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard had invited themselves as well. Mrs Crisp swore, and at that moment, Russell walked back in and told her Andrew and Tanya were coming too.

She had her revenge. She handed him a shopping list and told him not to bother coming back if he didn't get everything on it, which kept him nicely out of everyone's way.

They let me go eventually. I wandered upstairs to my bedroom. My refuge. Despite all Thomas's best efforts, still my safe haven.

At the door, however, I paused and looked up the passage to Russell's room. I'd only been in it once. I was never likely to enter it again. Curiosity got the better of me. I climbed the little stair, opened his door, and stepped inside.

His bed was made. Of course, he hadn't slept in it last night. I could smell brush cleaner and aftershave and a very faint whiff of horse. Very Russell. A pair of jeans hung over the back of a chair. Three shoes, all different, had been kicked around the room. A battered paperback lay open and face down on the bed. The picture of his mother still stood on the chest of drawers.

The last time I'd been in here, the walls had been bare, but now, six or seven sketches were stuck here and there. Some were no more than a collection of lines, two looked finished.

Uncomfortably aware I was spying, I inched closer. Pictures of me reading, staring into space, a profile ... pictures of *me*. Gently, delicately rendered. It was almost a physical shock. I'd never sat for him; He must have done these from memory. Why?

I had no idea ... On the other hand, I'd missed so much over the last months that this one more thing hardly made any difference. We'd already established I was stupid – it was only the depths of my stupidity that remained to be ascertained.

A slight sound on the stairs had me bolting in guilty fright. I gained my own room and closed the door behind me. When my heart rate returned to acceptable levels, I curled up on the window seat, picked up my book, held it in front of me like a shield, stopped being stupid, and really, *really* started to think properly.

Mrs Crisp brought me a cup of tea just as the afternoon started to draw in.

There was nothing for me to do downstairs. I was to concentrate on getting ready. She seemed surprisingly brisk and cheerful, given events over the last twenty-four hours.

I didn't make any huge effort with my appearance. Why should I? Those days were done. I changed into clean trousers, a white top, a warm grey waterfall cardigan, and a pair of black boots. An outfit that made me feel warm and secure. I fastened on my pretty watch for good luck. And to send a message.

I knew Russell was in the house. I'd been hearing echoes of his voice this last half hour.

Taking a deep breath and wishing more than ever for the comforting smell of warm ginger biscuits, I made my way downstairs. At Mrs Crisp's request, I inspected the dining-room. It was never going to be beautiful, but the table was nicely laid, the old carpet hoovered, and most of the chairs matched.

The first guests were Andrew and Tanya, a good half an hour early; at Russell's request, I suspected. Once they were inside and welcomed with a drink, the master of the house appeared, ignored me, and went to stand with Tanya at the other end of the room. When Andrew came to stand close by, Mrs Crisp, clear-eyed this evening, left me and drifted back into the kitchen.

Next up were Daniel and Francesca. Francesca ignored Russell, turning a shoulder very pointedly. I wondered what he thought about this very public rejection by the former love of his life. Battle lines were being drawn up. Andrew and Daniel chatted aimlessly. I stared into the fire and ignored the drink waiting for me. I know Russell was down the other end of the room, out of reach, but I wasn't taking any chances. The further away he was, the safer I'd be.

Finally, Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard arrived. Soberly dressed and stern-faced. Mrs Crisp got us lined up and marched into the dining-room.

I had no idea what, if anything, was going to happen that night. I had no idea who, if anyone, was on my side.

Russell began to fill glasses. Everyone got one but me. Mrs Crisp took a glass, filled it from a bottle on the trolley, and passed it to me with a warning frown.

'Your wine, Mrs Checkland.'

I sipped and kept my face straight. It was water.

The implications of the separate glass and bottle were not lost on the others. I braced myself and wondered who would open the batting.

It was Aunt Julia. Of course it was. I just prayed Russell would keep his head down and his mouth shut.

'Oh, God,' he said, loudly. 'She's going to orate.'

'You could at least try to remember the courtesy due to your guests,' she said, angrily.

'You're not my guests,' he said, draining his glass and refilling it. 'You invited yourselves, remember? Feel free to leave anytime.'

That reminded her why she was here. She turned to me, her face tight with anger. ‘Jenny ...’

I cleared my throat and focused ...

‘Before anyone goes any further,’ I said, interrupting her for the first and last time in my life. ‘I’m not ... going anywhere. I’m staying here. I like it here. I’m not sure how many plans that ruins, Russell, Francesca, Aunt Julia, but that’s the ... bottom line. I’m staying here.’

I recklessly finished my water and Mrs Crisp, equally recklessly, filled it up again.

Aunt Julia drew breath.

‘Never mind all that,’ said Francesca, homing in on the important issues like a heat-seeking missile sighting Krakatoa. ‘Daniel, I’ve been thinking about which part I shall play – Mary Stuart or Elizabeth Tudor. I mean, obviously Elizabeth wins in the end and lives longer so it’s a bigger part, but Mary has a wonderful death scene. Tragic, but defiant. But it’s up to you, of course, darling. I prefer Elizabeth, but whichever you think best.’

He didn’t speak. The table, to a man, braced themselves.

‘Actually, Francesca, I already have someone in mind for Elizabeth.’

‘Oh. Well, never mind. Mary it is, then.’

‘And for Mary, too.’

‘But ... you can’t ... what about me?’

Good old Franny – straight to the heart of the matter.

Acutely embarrassed, he shifted in his chair. ‘I hardly think this is the place ...’

‘No,’ said Aunt Julia, dragging the conversation from one crisis back to the other. ‘Jenny ...’

Again, she got no further.

Mrs Crisp served the pâté.

I received a separate portion. She stripped off the protective cling film and placed a blue plate in front of me. Everyone else had white. Everyone stared at my blue plate and then back at their own.

Aunt Julia pushed hers away with loathing. Francesca stared at hers as if it was about to go for her throat. Andrew, Tanya, and Daniel got stuck in. I waited. Things were happening here, and as usual, I didn’t have a clue.

Francesca regrouped.

‘So what part do I have?’ she said. ‘There must be something for me. I have red hair.’

That more qualifications for appearing in a major new TV drama might be required never seemed to enter her head.

Silence fell. I looked down the table at Russell, flanked by Aunt Julia and Tanya. I had Uncle Richard on one side and Andrew on the other. Francesca and Daniel occupied the neutral zone in the middle. I felt very alone.

Even as I looked, Russell caught my eye, stared expressionlessly for a moment, and then looked away. My stomach lurched.

‘Jenny, my dear. Try and eat a little.’ Uncle Richard pushed my plate forward, smiling gently. His expression said, ‘We’ll let them fight it out, shall we? Then we’ll put our heads together and do the sensible thing. You and I together.’

I remembered my last evening in his house, sitting at the kitchen table, cosy and warm while he waited for his milk to boil. Before all this started. I could have cried my eyes out. Cried for all the opportunities missed. Cried for everything that had gone wrong.

‘Leave her alone,’ said Russell, harshly.

For the third time, Aunt Julia said, ‘Jenny ...

‘Yes, Aunt Julia? Are you enjoying your pâté? Mine is delicious.’

‘So, Jenny,’ said Daniel, weighing in again. In his own, but much more charming way, he was at least as single-minded as Francesca. It crossed my mind that she might have met her match. ‘I was wondering if you might like to contribute. You know, ideas, suggestions, a bit of research. And you’ll get a credit. From an idea by Jenny Checkland. That sort of thing.’

I wrenched my attention away from Russell and back to Daniel. I must have gaped at him, because he grinned and said, ‘Just nod if it’s easier.’

I did. I supposed this must be what real life is like. Down one minute, up the next. Never quite sure if it’s the best or the worst evening of your life.

‘Daniel, dear, you mustn’t forget that Jenny is recovering from a serious accident. She must regain her strength first. Perhaps after a few months careful rest in our home ...’

Did no one *ever* listen to me?

‘That’s very kind of you, but this is my home. I’m staying here.’ I looked at Russell. ‘Unless you want me to go.’

He said, neutrally, ‘It’s your decision.’

‘That’s settled, then.’

Although, of course, it wasn’t.

‘Jenny, I’m sorry,’ said Daniel, ‘but we do have to get a move on.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ I said.

‘So we’ll make a start next week, if that’s all right with you?’

I nodded.

‘Have a think, jot down anything you think might be useful. Anything at all. You’d be amazed what’s useable.’

‘But what about me?’ demanded Francesca, returning again to the crux of the matter.

‘Well, my dear, it’s lovely that you’re so – enthusiastic. Perhaps – a lady in waiting...’ he said hopefully.

‘Or a courtesan?’ murmured an anonymous voice from the other end of the table.

‘Russell!’ snapped Aunt Julia.

‘What?’ he said in either genuine or well-feigned indignation.

‘Yes,’ I said, before anyone else could say anything. ‘Do I come to you,

Daniel? Or will you come here?’

‘Come to me. All my notes are there. Shall I pick you up?’

‘No need,’ said Russell, curtly. ‘I’ll bring her over.’

‘Thank you, Russell. Then, when Thomas is better, I’ll ride over. If that’s all right with you, Daniel.’

‘It’s not all right at all,’ broke in Aunt Julia.

‘Nearly two minutes without emoting,’ said Russell, in what he probably imagined was a low voice. ‘Could that be some sort of record?’

If he was trying to deflect her, he was wasting his time. Where did he think Francesca got it from?

‘You can’t be serious, Jenny. Riding? After what happened? I don’t expect much from you, Russell, when it comes to your wife’s safety, but I can’t believe that animal hasn’t been destroyed. It’s clearly unsafe.’

He drank more wine and smiled dangerously.

‘Never going to happen, Julia.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘You’re hardly in a position to dictate to anyone, are you?’

‘Really? Why is that?’

‘You know very well why not.’

‘No, I don’t, Julia. You’re just going to have to come right out and say it.’

Uncle Richard said suddenly, ‘Be quiet, Julia.’

Russell cast him a mocking look. ‘How wise.’ Only he could make it sound like an insult.

Uncle Richard put down his wine glass and said, with quiet dignity, ‘I don’t think it would be wise for you to argue with us, Russell. Not after the events of yesterday. Jenny will come quietly home with us tonight and we’ll help her consider her future.’

‘Her future? That would be funny, Richard, coming from anyone but you. I think we both know what sort of a future is in store for Jenny. It’s up to her, of course, but if she wishes to remain here, then she will.’ He smiled sardonically. ‘With me.’

‘You!’

And here was Aunt Julia again. She’d once told someone that one of her ancestors came over with the Conqueror. Considering the riff-raff he brought with him, my own theory was that she was descended from a camp follower or a black-marketeer, but you certainly had to have a pedigree of over a thousand years to put that amount of scorn and contempt into just one single-syllable word. Eat your heart out, Lady Bracknell.

‘You –’ Having made this promising beginning, she fell silent, apparently overcome by her emotions.

‘What about me?’ said Russell, suddenly not smiling at all. ‘Go on, Julia. Say it. What about me?’

The lid came off.

‘You evil, unspeakable man. You married my niece against our wishes and

having secured her money, you've spent the last months engineering a series of suspicious accidents. Don't try to deny you've been violent to her. There are no words to describe your depravity, Russell Checkland, or your cruelty or your –'

'Well, as usual, you seem to have found plenty. Do you know, I can't remember a time when you weren't talking, Julia. Anyway, you're wrong.'

'Do you deny –?'

'Of course I deny it. You're spitting your poison at completely the wrong person.'

Uncle Richard tried again. 'Julia, I forbid you ...'

'Oh really, Russell? Well, if not you, then whom?'

Silence.

He sat back in his chair, holding his wine glass. 'Do you really want me to answer that? Here? Now?'

'Yes, yes I do.'

She leaned forward in her seat, red-faced and furious. The rest of us watched in – fascination is not the right word. It was like an oncoming car crash. You know it's going to be bad, but you just can't look away.

Russell sat up and said, 'I am sorry, Jenny. I really am. But things can't go on like this. You're going to be badly hurt and I'm going to end up in prison. I hope you can understand.'

'I do understand. Do whatever you think is best. I'm standing right behind you.'

He smiled sadly. 'No, don't do that. You can stand alongside me. Or back to back with me. You can even stand on top of me, if you like, but you are never to stand behind me, Jenny. Is that clear?'

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak.

'Jenny, my dear, what are you saying?'

I turned to Uncle Richard, suddenly too tired and sad to speak. Maybe it wasn't too late ... I groped for his hand but he pulled it away.

Aunt Julia leaned forward. 'What's going on here? What are you saying, Jenny? Are you saying – it's not Russell?'

'Of course it's not Russell, Aunt Julia. It never was Russell. He's an idiot of course ...'

'Thanks, wife.'

'And he's been digging his own grave as fast as he can ... go, but no, it's not Russell. Apart from yesterday afternoon. Russell, I am so not speaking to you about that. You gave me the worst afternoon of ... my life.'

'I'm sorry, Jenny. I couldn't think of any other way.'

'I know. Never do that again.'

'No. Once was enough.'

Surprisingly, Daniel Palmer spoke. 'Francesca, please get your things together.'

She gaped at him.

‘We’re leaving now and you’re coming home with me.’

Russell nodded at him. ‘Thank you, Daniel. You should get her away as quickly as possible.’

‘Get her away?’ said Francesca. ‘I’m not going anywhere. Why would I? Stop it, Daniel, you’re frightening me.’

‘Francesca, you have a choice to make. Jenny isn’t the only one deciding her future tonight. I’ve offered you the protection of marriage, but if you don’t come with me now, I may not be able to help you.’

‘Why?’ she said to him, bewildered. ‘Why must I go?’

‘Well, Russell, you haven’t answered my question. If not you, then whom?’

‘Julia, I won’t tell you again. Be silent.’

‘Daniel? What’s happening?’

And just when things were wound up to screaming point, someone knocked at the door.

Everyone looked at everyone else. Russell nodded to Kevin who went off to persuade the front door to open. I heard voices and footsteps approaching.

Christopher walked in.

I hadn’t seen him properly for years. I’d caught brief glimpses of him occasionally. Not at his bookshop, obviously. He probably wasn’t sure where it was. He strutted into the room. A little man making a big entrance.

My first reaction was fear. I don’t know why. I wasn’t a child any more. What could he do to me in my own home? Yes, he was a bully, but he was a coward too. Both Russell and Andrew loathed him. I was perfectly safe, yet I was still afraid.

Still, it wasn’t as if the evening could get much worse ...

Under the table, Andrew took my hand and squeezed hard. I couldn’t look at him. I couldn’t look at anyone.

Russell made no move to greet him. The silence went on and on.

‘Now then, my boy,’ said Uncle Richard, eventually. ‘What are you doing here? Hmm?’

Christopher didn’t bother replying. His gaze fell on Uncle Richard and then switched to me. I felt suddenly cold.

Russell stood up, abruptly.

Uncle Richard said hurriedly, ‘Now, let’s find you a chair, shall we? You can sit here, with me and Jenny.’

‘No, he can’t,’ said Russell. ‘I don’t want the little runt here at all, but if he is going to stay then I’ll have him up near me, where I can make sure he’s not stealing the silver or groping the staff. Watch yourself, Kevin.’

It was a good effort. For one moment I really did think the three of them would storm from the room, the house, my life, everything. However, wishes seldom come true.

He sat, rather heavily, between Aunt Julia and Russell, drank her wine, and held up her glass for more. He was ignored.

Still channelling kindly old uncle as fast as he could go, Uncle Richard

stood up.'

'Well, I can see you're tired, Jenny. Perhaps it was a little ambitious of you to plan such a large party so soon after your accident. We'll leave you in peace now. Daniel, I know you won't stay too long. We don't want to tire her out.'

He was ignored, too.

Russell played idly with his knife.

Kevin stood behind Christopher.

Mrs Crisp stood behind me.

Sharon stood by the door.

You could have heard a mouse sneeze.

'Francesca, this is the last time I shall say this. The last time I'll be able to look out for you. Look at me. You must leave with me. Now.'

She tried to pull her hands away but he held them in a firm grasp.

'Stop. Stop. Look at me.'

She stopped struggling, looked at him, looked away, and then looked back as if she was seeing him for the first time. She looked around the table. You could practically hear the wheels turning. The silence lengthened. She opened her mouth to speak. We all held our breath.

Christopher lunged for Russell's glass and knocked the bottle over, sending the contents streaming down the table.

Everyone grabbed their glasses and plates. Mrs Crisp and Sharon mopped and dabbed. As always, there seemed far more on the table than there could possibly be in one bottle.

Eventually order was restored. We all sat back down again.

I lifted my glass to my lips.

It was wine. Not water. Wine. Everything crashed into place – it had been them all along.

Like the echo of a nightmare, Mrs Crisp reached over my shoulder and took the glass.

I looked at Russell. He wasn't looking at me.

'Seriously?' he said. 'I can't believe you thought that would work a second time.'

Uncle Richard looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face cleared. 'I'm sorry, Jenny. I seem to have handed you Andrew's wine by mistake.'

'Nice try,' said Andrew.

'And there you have your answer, Julia.'

'I don't understand,' she faltered.

'Yes, you do.'

'Are you saying ...?'

'Yes, I am.'

'This is ridiculous,' said Uncle Richard, angrily. 'I've simply muddled the glasses. Believe me, it's easily done when you get to my age.'

'Oh, spare us,' said Russell. 'You're not simple, kindly Uncle Richard at

all. You never have been. You're the nastiest piece of work I've met in a long time. I strongly suspect your family are all very afraid of you. How else could you persuade them to do what they've done?"

'I think,' he said, heavily, 'that too much has already been said tonight. We'll talk tomorrow when heads are cooler.'

'No, we won't,' said Russell. 'Because, after tonight, no one from your family is ever going to be welcome here again. That includes you, Francesca. You should have gone with Daniel. You're in it now, as deeply as they are.'

'We'll go to the police,' said Aunt Julia.

'All right. Will you ring them or shall I?'

Christopher's glance flicked to me.

Defiant, I stared back. But only because Andrew and Russell were close to hand.

Russell smiled, mirthlessly. 'You won't go to the police. Will you, Richard?'

Uncle Richard sat down. His lined face looked careworn and sad. An overworked family man wrestling with difficult problems.

'I can see that nothing will be resolved until you've had your say, Russell. Perhaps you'd like to tell us what you think. Get it off your chest. I shall be interested to hear what you're offering in the way of proof.'

'Oh, that's easy. The wire that Christopher stretched across the path to bring down Jenny's horse. We've got it stashed in our barn. My extremely intelligent wife brought it back with her. I bet Christopher's fingerprints are all over it.'

I bet they weren't. Or if they had been, they weren't after I'd been handling it, but never mind.

'And that glass you just passed Jenny, now safely in Mrs Crisp's possession, will almost certainly contain the same substance you used before. Probably a stronger dose this time. And that will have your fingerprints all over it.'

'This is ridiculous. Jenny has become confused. There is no difference between her glass and mine.'

'Richard, we're not idiots. Jenny has been drinking water all evening. As soon as you swapped glasses – courtesy of the fuckwit here – we all knew. Did you think that after yesterday, everyone would simply assume it was me and look no further? You've really lost your head, haven't you?'

'Jenny, these are just the accusations of a desperate man. He tried yesterday and failed. He's tried again tonight, been discovered and is now busy blaming everyone else as fast he can.'

'No, he didn't,' I said.

Russell sighed. 'There was nothing wrong with the tea yesterday, Richard. I drank it myself in the kitchen afterwards. Mrs Crisp and I put that little scene together to panic you and Julia. It worked, didn't it? Suddenly, you realised you weren't the only ones out to do Jenny harm. And if she died before you

got her back, well, you'd really be screwed then, wouldn't you?"

Aunt Julia had regained her calm. 'Really, this is preposterous. Have the courage to accept the truth, Russell. Stand back. Let Jenny come home in peace and we'll say no more about it.'

'No, we fucking won't, Julia.' He slammed the table in rage. Crockery jumped and rattled. 'We're going to say a lot about it.'

My God, he was angry. I'd never seen him like this. He was very white around the mouth, his hair stood on end, and his eyes glittered.

Tanya said something and he subsided. 'Jenny, I didn't mean to frighten you. I've just been so worried you would believe them.' He smiled. 'I should have known you'd worked it out.'

'I did. Most of it, anyway. I just don't know why. What did I do to make them want to kill me?'

'You didn't do anything, love. And they didn't want to kill you. That was the last thing they wanted. That's why they were so frightened over what Christopher did. I bet he got a right bollocking for that. If you died, then as your husband, I'd get everything, which wouldn't suit them at all. The whole point was to have you suffer a number of suspicious but minor accidents that would implicate me. Right from the beginning, I've been the one they were after. And my property, of course,' he finished bitterly.

He continued. 'With me out of the picture, Jenny, you'd go back to live with them. I would – or wouldn't – be in prison. I expect, having planted very public suspicions in everyone's minds, they'd offer to cover things up if I went quietly. If I left you the house and land. You'd go back to live with them. For your own good, of course. And then – and I have no evidence of this, it's just a suspicion, but in a few years, Jenny, you'd have been found one morning with an empty bottle of pills by your bedside and a little note saying you couldn't go on.'

My mind flew back to that day. The day Thomas turned up. They'd so nearly got away with it all those years ago. But Thomas had come.

I turned to Uncle Richard.

'It would seem you're not as clever as you thought you were.'

'You –' His mouth worked with fury. 'Who are you to talk about clever?'

The suppressed violence frightened me.

'Shut up, Richard,' said Russell, but he wouldn't. After all these years, the floodgates opened.

'You ... why should you have all that money? If you'd died with them it would have come to Julia. It would have been ours. It should be ours.'

Them? I felt as if he'd thrown cold water over me. I stared at him, trying to force the question between stiff lips. 'Did you ...? Were you responsible for my parents' accident?'

'No, of course not. We're not murderers.'

No, they weren't, technically. But when I thought of what they'd done to Thomas. And Mrs Crisp. And Russell. They would have seen him in prison;

his life ruined, without a second thought.

Cold, numb horror was settling in my stomach, heavy as lead. I looked at their faces – the people who were supposed to care for me, to love me ... I'd suspected, but now I knew. I could feel things slide away from me. It's no small thing to have your family hate you ...

Mrs Crisp, standing behind me, put her hand on my shoulder.

I pushed my way past sick betrayal and said to Uncle Richard, 'But why ...?'

He wouldn't look at me. None of them would look at me. Except Francesca, who was staring in baffled horror.

Tanya spoke very gently.

'I'm sorry, Jenny. It was your money. They have been quietly helping themselves for years. For themselves. For Christopher. And, I am sorry to say, Francesca, for you too. Did you never stop to wonder where all the money came from? Your expenses? Your London allowance?'

I wasn't sure Francesca was hearing any of this. I could sympathise. I was having problems too.

'Jenny, I am sorry to say this to you, but your money is nearly gone. That is the one reason they let you marry Russell. Having done that, they sowed as many public seeds as they could – your suspicious accidents, the rumour you were being abused by your husband. The mysterious food poisoning that affected no one else. Most of Rushford is convinced Russell is trying to kill you for your money. And Russell, of course, big idiot that he is, played right into their hands. Every time.'

'Jenny,' said Aunt Julia, with a huge effort. 'I don't know how you can listen to this. After everything we've done for you ...'

'Oh, for God's sake, Julia,' shouted Russell. 'Give it up. You've done nothing for her. You've isolated her, denied her a normal life, and frightened her with stupid stories about having to live in a "special place". You've stolen from her, poisoned her, undermined her, your stupid son almost killed her – it just goes on and on. So shut up about the benefits supposedly showered on her over the years, or I'll take that coil of wire and go straight to the police – right now. And Mrs Crisp has Jenny's glass, too. And the contents. After you tried to blame her for Jenny's poisoning, she doesn't love you any more than I do.'

Controlling trembling lips, Aunt Julia tried again. 'I think you forget, Russell, Francesca and I were in this very house yesterday when you tried to ...'

'I told you, the tea was fine,' he said with contempt. The whole thing was to frighten you into thinking that maybe I *was* trying to do away with your niece. That I did have designs on her money, after all. How scared were you then, Julia? Scared enough to go straight back to Richard and organise yourselves an invite to dinner tonight. So you could have another go. One last effort to get Jenny back and send me down.

'You're a ruthless bitch, Julia. You dropped oil on the stairs for Jenny to

slip on. And she nearly caught you. You had to turn around and pretend to be coming *up* the stairs. I give you credit for genuine shock afterwards. She came a right cropper, didn't she? Right in front of your eyes. All thanks to you. And so neatly mopped up afterwards, as you supposedly clutched your hankie in shock. Did you think I wouldn't recognise the smell of linseed oil? Clever of you to use something half Rushford knew I'd bought the day before. Thanks to the very public scene you organised. From a woman famous for avoiding public unpleasantness? You really overdid it there, didn't you?"

I couldn't help it. A stupid, dry sob forced itself up through my chest. Andrew took my hand again, saying quietly, 'Nearly done, Jenny, I promise you. Nearly done.'

Tanya dumped her briefcase on the table, pulling out documents.

'I will tell you now of the offer Russell will make to you. I will tell you this only once. If you refuse he – we – will go to the police with the glass, the contents, the wire, and certain financial statements which you will not wish made public.'

'You're bluffing,' said Uncle Richard.

'I think,' said Andrew, suddenly looking very like Russell, 'that when you admitted you and Miss Bauer were professionally acquainted, you assumed she was a solicitor, like yourself. I'm afraid we allowed you to continue with that assumption. Actually, Miss Bauer is a forensic accountant. And she's good. She's very, very good. Would you like to see the statements?'

Uncle Richard made an abrupt gesture.

Tanya continued.

'This document transfers ownership of Christopher's business to Jenny. After all, she has probably bought it many times over the years. The agreement covers the business, stock, and premises.

'Not the premises.'

Most definitely the premises. The only reason you have been propping him up over the years. When the new shopping area happens ...' she tailed away. 'Now. Sign.'

Aunt Julia was distraught. 'Not Christopher's business. Richard, you can't. What will he do?'

Russell spoke with massive restraint. 'Let me put this in terms you can understand, Richard. You will sign Christopher's worthless business – and the building, because that does have value – over to Jenny, now, tonight, or Tanya hands the whole file over to her boss. The police are involved. You're ruined and go to prison. Julia is ruined and goes to prison. Christopher is ruined and goes to prison. Francesca is just ruined. Your business, your reputation, everything will be gone by this time tomorrow. And I'll do it, Richard. I'll bring you down with more pleasure than anything I've done in my entire life. So sign. Now.'

'No,' said Aunt Julia, shrilly. 'It's Christopher's.'

'Very well. I must admit sending you all to prison was always my first

choice. Tanya ...'

She began to put the papers away.

Uncle Richard said quietly, 'I'll do it.'

She passed him the document and he signed. Christopher signed. Kevin and Mrs Crisp witnessed.

'And now,' said Russell, between his teeth, 'get that tosspot out of here before I break his neck.'

Kevin yanked Christopher from his seat and hustled him out of the room. I remembered afterwards that he'd never said a word the whole time. He rarely did, but Christopher had more impact on that evening than everyone else in the room.

Francesca dragged big, frightened eyes away from Russell to Daniel and said, 'Daniel. Yes.'

'Good girl,' he said, taking her hand.

Russell had more to say.

'I'm not finished with you yet, Richard. You will retire. You have one year. One year to sell up – practice, house, everything, and clear out of Rushford. You will sign over one half of the proceeds to Jenny as reparation and we'll let you leave quietly. Otherwise ...'

I don't think Aunt Julia quite understood the implications. She turned angrily to Russell.

'But that would leave us with barely anything. Where would we go?

'Who cares?'

'Jenny, you can't ...'

'I told you. Leave her alone. She's nothing to do with you any longer.'

Uncle Richard said again, 'Shut up, Julia. One third, Russell. You take one third and we go quietly.'

'Done. Sign here.'

He did.

'Now get out.'

Aunt Julia still hadn't given up. 'We never meant to kill anyone. We certainly never meant to kill Jenny. You must believe that. When Christopher ... well, we were horrified. If she'd just lived quietly with us, she could have had a nice life. Secure, protected. We took her into our own home. We looked after her.'

'Not a home – a prison. Jenny, there's nothing wrong with you. I keep telling you, but you're so brainwashed ... You have a bit of a stutter and the self-esteem of a tea bag. That's all. There's absolutely no reason in the world why you can't live a normal life. This – threat – that's been held over your head is – as I think I once told you – utter bollocks. They used it to control you. And the longer you stayed, the less likely you were to leave. Or want to. And everyone just accepted it – you, your school, everyone in Rushford. They all thought you were little Jenny Dove, not quite right, poor thing, who lives with her kind aunt and uncle. And if I hadn't come along – I mean, I saw at a

glance that ...'

Andrew said, 'Russ ...'

He stopped. Took a deep breath. Got control.

'Julia, get out. Before I become violent.'

Her face changed. I would not have known her.

'You stupid, stupid girl. From the moment they dumped you on me I knew you were trouble. Never speaking. Always watching. And you had the money while my own bright, beautiful children ... It's not as if you ever needed it. You weren't doing anything with your life. All you had to do was live with us. It wasn't so much to ask.'

'Richard, shut her up.'

'Who were you compared with us? You're nothing. That's how I always think of you. The nothing girl. I blame you, Russell. You cause trouble wherever you go. Your father killed his wife. Why shouldn't you have done the same?'

Without warning, Uncle Richard wheeled on her. 'Julia. Be silent. I forbid you to say another word. Does it not occur to you they may be recording this?'

'But, Richard ...'

'Shut. Up.'

The words reverberated with barely-restrained ferocity. I stared at him in shock. Where was the Uncle Richard I'd known? Where had he gone? The answer was, of course, that he had never been there. That was just the face he had chosen to show to the world. And me. I felt sick when I thought of his false kindness, his concern, and all this time ...

It was time I said something. Because all right, they'd had a go at me, but Russell was the one who'd really been in danger. It was Russell whose life would have been ruined. For the second time. I don't know what happened. And I don't know why it happened then. I only know, that suddenly, without any warning – I found my voice.

'Get out. Get out of our house. Both of you. It makes me sick just to have you here. You called me a nothing girl. Well, this nothing girl despises you. I'd rather be nothing and loved by Russell Checkland than anything else on earth. You would have ruined his life and he's so much better than you. He's kind and generous and passionate and everything you're not. He will be a great painter one day. And – and he goes like a train.'

Aunt Julia's face twitched with disgust.

I picked up steam.

'And I'll tell you this for nothing. You will leave Rushford and you will never come back. Russell might be content with seeing you all in prison, but he's a much nicer person than I am. I swear, if I ever see any of you again – I will *end* you.'

Those final words throbbed with a passion I didn't know I possessed.

Andrew laughed. 'Congratulations, Russ. You told me she was a winner.'

I turned to him. ‘Did he?’

‘Several times. God, Jenny, the nights I’ve had to spend listening to him boring on about you ...’

‘Yes, thank you, Andrew,’ said Russell. ‘Why are you still here?’

‘For the food, of course. Can we get rid of the peasants and eat, please?’

‘Of course. Kevin, show this crowd out. Franny, you’re welcome to stay if you want. You can’t help your ghastly relatives.’

She said automatically, ‘Don’t call me Franny.’

‘Take them out through the kitchen, Kev. I don’t want anything getting in the way of their hasty departure. Jenny, I don’t know what you’re doing down that end of the table with Andrew. You deserve better than that. Come and sit up here with me.’

I never actually saw Aunt Julia and Uncle Richard leave. I sat by Russell and he held both my hands. They’d been the most important people in my life for so long and when I looked up, they were gone.

He said, ‘I should apologise. For yesterday.’

‘It’s all right.’

‘No, it’s not. If you could have seen the look on your face – I nearly kicked it all into touch there and then. I almost gave you a heads-up at the top of the stairs, but ... And then all I could do was make sure you were never alone, or that if you were then I was miles away. With witnesses. And hope you put it all together.’

‘It took a while for my brain to start moving again, but I got there.’

‘And I’m so sorry about tonight, but I had to force the issue. I had to frighten the pair of them into making a move. In front of witnesses. But you’re safe now. I promise you, Jenny ...’

But I never found out what he was promising me.

The door crashed open and Kevin raced back into the room, his face as white as his shirt.

‘The stables are on fire.’

Chapter Fifteen

In a second, Russell's face lost all colour. This was his worst nightmare come true. He shot to his feet with such force that his chair flew backwards.

‘Andrew!’

‘With you, mate.’

They scrambled to the door. Kevin was already gone.

To my surprise, Daniel Palmer was on his feet as well. We gained two good friends that night.

He said, ‘Francesca, stay here,’ but she ignored him, following us all out. Russell fired off instructions.

‘Mrs Crisp – ring the fire brigade. Tell them we have horses. They need to know. Kevin – get the hose. Don’t try anything yourself. Just wait for me. Sharon – get buckets. Jenny – close the gate.’

I nodded. Horses hate fire. They fear it. They’re terrified of it. The last thing we needed was panicking horses bolting through the gate and getting involved with traffic down in the village.

We grabbed old coats and followed them out into the yard just in time to see Andrew follow Russell into the stables, Daniel and Kevin close behind.

It was a nightmare. Not just Russell’s nightmare – everyone’s nightmare. Billowing smoke, pale in the darkness, thick and pungent made the familiar unfamiliar. Strange shapes loomed and vanished, giving the whole scene the appearance of a stop-start movie.

I stood, disbelieving. This could not be happening. We had thought it was all over, but Christopher – who else? – had struck at us one last time. Beside me, Tanya muttered something bad in German.

I set off across the yard to secure the gate. Once done, I had time to look around. It wasn’t the stables after all. The smoke came from the barn next door. Where we stored the feed. Horribly inflammable hay and straw. And Christopher’s coil of wire. The bad taste in my mouth was not entirely due to the acrid smoke.

I waited impatiently. They seemed to have been in the stables an awfully long time. I was tempted to go over myself, but there were four of them in there already and the passage was narrow. More bodies would not be helpful. Sick with dread, I stood by the gate on legs that were not completely mine and waited.

I knew what the problem would be. It would be Marilyn. Donkeys have more sense than horses. They do not flee blindly. Faced with peril, they stand still and have a bit of a think. People think they’re stubborn, but actually, they’re very sensible. Although not that sensible. She would be standing, stock still, while the stable filled with smoke from next door, the flames spread, the roof came down ... I shook myself. That would not happen.

Russell would not let that happen. Not tonight. Not after everything that had happened. We couldn't lose everything now. Russell would –

Russell would burn to death, or be crushed by a falling building, or trampled by stampeding horses. Russell could die tonight. Along with my confidence, my hopes for the future – everything I ever wanted. And without him, his strength, his belief in me, Julia and Richard would be back. I could hear it now. 'Poor Jenny. What a tragedy. Such a shock for her. I don't think she'll ever get over it, you know.' And who would believe me? And Andrew might die too. And Daniel. Or Kevin. I felt hot panic eat away at the edges of my mind. The urge to do something. Anything.

I let go of the gate and started across the yard. Tanya caught my arm. 'No. No, Jenny. You must leave them. It is not allowed that you go in there.'

She was right. It's easy to get involved in a catastrophe and make things worse. The hard part is to stand back and do nothing. She rubbed my arm. 'Leave it to Andrew and Russell.'

Finally, Daniel Palmer appeared through the smoke, leading a slow-moving Thomas. I heard Francesca catch her breath on a sob, but Thomas limped gamely through the murk. He was sweating and trembling, but by Frogmorton standards, as calm as a rock.

Daniel called, 'Jenny!' and I ran forward to take Thomas. 'Russell says – get him into the field. He may try to run back in again.'

I nodded. Horses do this, as well. They feel safe in their stable – it's their home – and, when threatened, that's where they run to. Even if it's on fire at the time.

I led Thomas away. I heard Francesca shout, 'Daniel!' but he turned away, put his hands on his knees, drew a couple of breaths, and went straight back in again.

I shouted at Francesca to open the gate into the field. She ran clumsily. Manolo Blahniks. Good old Franny.

Tanya took my place over at the main gate, peering down the road for the emergency services. Where were they? It seemed hours had passed but it was probably less than ten minutes. Maybe they were over the other side of the county. Maybe they were already out on a call and by the time they got here, it would be too late.

We got Thomas into the field and I made myself turn my back on whatever was happening in the yard and concentrate on soothing him. It gave me a purpose and after everything that had happened to him, he deserved better than to be pitch-forked into a freezing field and left alone in the dark.

We waited. And waited. Where the hell was Russell? What was going on in there? Thomas stood quietly enough, trembling but calm. We stood together, our cloudy breath mingling in the cold night air. I seriously considered handing him over to Francesca, but just as I opened my mouth to call her, Kevin appeared, staggering across the yard with Marilyn in his arms. He made his way to the field, followed by Francesca, who was shouting, 'Where's

Daniel? Where is Russell? What's going on in there?"

All good questions, but the poor lad was in no state to answer. He carefully set her down. She was paralysed with fright. Under her fringe, her eyes were screwed tight shut and she stood – barely – on widely splayed legs. She was in shock. It was a pitiful sight. So had she looked when she first came to us. I felt an icy rage. If I ever, *ever* saw Christopher again ...

'What's the problem in there?' I said to Kevin, although I knew the answer to that one.

'Boxer,' he said, tightly, gasping for breath. That would partly be because of the smoke and partly because the little donkey was considerably heavier now than when she'd first arrived. 'We thought – if we get her out – he might follow.'

We all looked towards the stable door. It was never going to be that easy. Boxer would be climbing the walls in terror, mindlessly injuring those trying to help him.

I put my hand on his arm and said, 'Kevin ...'

'It's OK, Mrs Checkland. He said I'm not to go back in. I can't do anything and it's too dangerous. Russell and Andrew will get him out.'

He walked back into the yard, took the hose from Sharon, and started to wet the barn doors. I had no idea how much good that would do.

Thomas shuffled forward and dropped his head to Marilyn. She lifted her nose but under the fringe, her eyes were still tightly closed. He nuzzled behind her ears and she made that small sound again.

Still no sign of Andrew and Russell. Francesca was openly crying now. For two pins, I'd join in. I craned my neck. Where were they? What was going on in there?

Suddenly, from within, I heard a rumble. And a clatter. They'd got him moving. Someone shouted a warning and there was a huge crash. Something big had come down. Not Boxer. Please God, not Boxer. In my mind, I saw Russell – or Andrew – pinned beneath him. Trapped, while the flames drew ever closer.

Marilyn opened her eyes and did what every small donkey does when her world is coming apart around her. She complained.

She opened her mouth and let it all out. Like a whole fleet of super tankers blasting their horns at the world's biggest fogbank. I swear I could feel my chest rumble.

Francesca, not familiar with this aspect of donkey ownership, took two steps back and stared wildly at her. 'What...?'

Before she could say any more, Marilyn did it again.

When she finally stopped, bizarrely, I could hear sirens in the distance. Was this some sort of response? Or had she put the whole county on bomb alert by now?

Back in the yard, Boxer erupted from the stables and emerged through the smoke, a wild-eyed nightmare from hell, trailing Russell and Andrew like a

pair of party balloons. Daniel ran behind.

Russell lost his grip and went down with a curse, right under his front hooves. Andrew collided with the doorjamb and fell back into the smoke.

Boxer continued unheeding. Hooves clattering, he charged across the yard. Terrified. Blind in his panic. He ran headlong into the water trough and crashed heavily to the ground.

Russell pulled himself to his feet, staggered a little, shouted 'Andrew!' and headed straight back into the stable.

Francesca screamed. Kevin shouted something and dropped the hose.

Sharon, tears rolling down her face, picked up the hose and continued hosing down the doors.

Boxer was trying to get up. Thrashing wildly, he lifted his huge head and his terrified screams echoed off the walls. A screaming horse is not something you ever want to hear. His flailing hooves scrabbled for purchase on the wet concrete. One hind leg was actually caught under the trough. I was terrified he would break it.

Marilyn was braying distress signals that could be heard in Venezuela.

I didn't stop to think. I threw Thomas's rein at Francesca and ran back into the yard. I threw myself across Boxer's head, pinning it to the ground. I expected any moment to be thrown off, or badly bitten, but if he couldn't lift his head, he couldn't get up.

I could hear Francesca screaming, 'Oh my God. Oh, my God,' over and over again. I could feel Boxer's steamroller breathing, hot against my leg.

Sharon dropped the hose. I could hear Tanya issuing instructions. Somehow, God knows how, they lifted the trough. Just high enough. Water sloshed everywhere. Once his leg was free, I rolled off him, and Kevin shouted to everyone to stand back and let him get up by himself.

He heaved himself to his feet, ears back, still frightened out of his few wits, ready to lash out at anything. Head down, he careered around the yard, desperately seeking a way out. And Marilyn. With Russell gone, she was his only certainty in this suddenly terrifying world.

Francesca stopped screaming, and without being told, seized the field gate and started to push it open.

She was far too slow.

Boxer breasted the gate without even noticing. Still too scared to see what he was doing, he knocked her flying. She went down like a tree and he appeared to run right over the top of her.

Horrified, I watched him disappear into the darkness. Marilyn struggled after him, crying out in distress. I raced as best I could to Francesca, dreading what I might find there.

I reached her – a dark lump lying on the ground and said, 'Franny, can you hear me? Franny?'

She was face down. A muffled voice said, 'Don't call me Franny.'

I swallowed hard. 'Sorry. Can you move? Do you have any pain?'

She said something rude, hoisted herself on her elbows, and slowly, stiffly, rolled over on her back.

One of Kevin's jobs is to go round the paddocks each morning with a bucket. It's good for the roses. He does a pretty good job, but occasionally he misses one.

Francesca had found it.

'Can you sit up?'

She nodded and I helped her to a sitting position. She groaned, but made surprisingly little fuss.

'Francesca?' A frantic Daniel arrived, shouldered me aside, and put his arms around her.

'Are you all right? What hurts?'

'Everything,' she said, comprehensively. Two large tears carved channels in the horseshit.

He stared at her, as did we all. Smoke-blackened, hair falling down, a split lip ... I waited for the tantrum. It never came.

She made a huge effort.

'I'm fine, Daniel.' She sounded astonished. 'The gate hit me. Then the horse hit me. Then the ground hit me.' She looked down at herself, smeared in mud and worse, wrecked shoes falling off her feet. 'Oh my God, Jenny, I look just like you.'

Her smile was wobbly, but she was smiling, Francesca had made a joke. I, on the other hand, was in tears for her.

And Russell. And Andrew. Where were they? Tanya was still outside the stables, desperately shouting their names. Smoke billowed faster than ever. Any minute now, something would ignite and they were both still in there. Andrew unconscious, maybe badly injured. Russell struggling to get him out, maybe injured himself. Disoriented by the smoke.

I stood and watched – like a spectator in a play.

Kevin, struggling in slow motion, Sharon and Tanya, an arm apiece, holding him back.

Mrs Crisp standing in the kitchen doorway, a dark shape against the lighted kitchen behind her, hands to her face.

Daniel clutching a smoke-blackened Francesca as if he would never let her go.

Then the world speeded up and many things happened at once.

The barn doors blew open with a boom and huge orange flames reached up to the night sky.

Flashing lights announced the arrival of the emergency services. They'd switched off the sirens, which was just as well. Marilyn might have relished the challenge. Suddenly, the yard was full of red and blue lights and men shouting and unrolling hoses.

Russell appeared, supporting a blood-stained Andrew. People ran towards them and pulled them away from the flames. Not me. My legs had stopped

working. I got as far as Thomas and had to stop, leaning heavily on him and crying into his mane. He took it very well.

Russell handed Andrew over to the paramedics and pushed his way towards me.

‘Hey, what’s all this? We’re all safe. Why are you crying?’

I couldn’t tell him why. The answer to that was far too complicated to attempt now.

‘I’ll be back in a minute. Stay here and try not to injure yourself.’

He crouched by Francesca. ‘Franny? Daniel told me. If you hadn’t got the gate open, he’d have injured himself really badly. I’m more grateful that I can ever say. Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ she said, still sounding slightly surprised. ‘I’m not.’

‘You’ll be stiff and sore tomorrow,’ he said. ‘Get Daniel to take you away to a really good spa hotel for a couple of days. In fact, it might be a good idea to go now.’

He stood up. ‘Get her away, Daniel. I’ll keep her out of it as much as I can, but if the police want to know what’s been going on here, then I’ll tell the truth. I’m not lying to protect that shithead, ChristopherKingdom.’

Daniel nodded, put his arm around her, and led her away. Tanya, bending over a coughing Andrew, straightened up. ‘Francesca. Next week – you will have lunch with Jenny and me. I will call you.’ It was a command.

She nodded, looking rather pale. Reaction was setting in. She waved feebly and then Daniel took her away.

Russell went off to speak to the fire brigade who had everything perfectly under control. There was a comforting feeling that tonight, finally, there were people here who knew what they were doing.

We found Boxer at the very edge of his field, snorting and trembling, but still just about on Planet Earth. Marilyn fussed around him like a small tugboat. We led them back to Thomas, who hadn’t moved and the three of them huddled together.

Martin Braithwaite turned up with his horsebox and took them away. They could spend the night quietly in his barn. He would keep an eye on them for us.

Tanya took Andrew to hospital. He and Russell exchanged a few words. Russell thumped him on the arm and then hugged him. This is probably not the recommended treatment for concussion.

He said to Tanya, ‘What can I say? There are no words ...’

She said, ‘Words are not needed, Russell.’

I sat on the ground, in the cold and dark, with Kevin on one side and Sharon on the other. We waited in silence. The cat turned up, dishevelled and smoky. He climbed onto my lap and I clutched him to my chest.

Mrs Crisp tried to get us to come inside. We refused. With much groaning, she sat on the ground with us. I worried we’d never get her up again.

It didn’t take them long to get things under control. The barn would need to

be rebuilt. Our feed was all gone. The stables next door suffered only water and smoke damage. Nothing that couldn't be put right. Nobody was dead.

Russell dealt with everything and everyone. There was no shouting.

He found us all, sitting in the dark, like refugees. He helped Mrs Crisp to her feet and she and Sharon went off to make the reservoir of tea that was such a small and inadequate reward for our wonderful fire-fighters.

He came back to me. 'Come on. We can go back inside now,' and pulled me to my feet. I tried to follow the others, but he held my arm, saying quietly, 'What's really the matter?'

Still clinging to the cat, I looked down. I looked up. I looked everywhere except –

'Out with it, wife.'

I shook my head.

'Jenny. It's been a long day. And it's not over yet. Tell me what's wrong. You remember – a long time ago – you promised you'd tell me. You wouldn't make me guess.'

True.

I took a deep breath. 'My family. What they've done to you. And tonight.' I gestured. 'And the deal was – I brought the money and you brought the house and there's no money. I can't keep up my end of the deal. You said –'

'Oh, for God's sake, Jenny.' The cat growled. He took two hasty steps backwards. 'Are you going to throw every stupid thing I've ever said right back at me? Now? Tonight? Because if you are then we're going to be standing here for a very long time. Is that all it's been for you? Just some sort of commercial transaction? Well it's not. Not for me, anyway. Well, it was initially, but not for long. And I guessed fairly early on about your money. That business with the feed bill never paid – and other things too. And now, now I finally get everything sorted out, it's all over and you're standing in a field in the middle of the night, crying your eyes out because you think you have no worth without money? If I wasn't the most easy-going, uncomplaining, patient bloke on the planet, I swear I'd be shouting my head off in frustration.'

He stopped shouting, took a very deep breath, and put his arm around me.

'It's all right, Jenny. I've got you ... *Now* why are you crying?'

'Because I've got you.'

'Well ... good ... OK. that's all right, then. Let's go inside before that lot finish off all the lemon tart. And bring the cat.'

'What?'

He grinned. 'Who do you think got Boxer moving? Old Buggerlugs here bit him. As far as I'm concerned, he has a home for life. But you knew that anyway, didn't you?'

The kitchen was full of people. All talking loudly. Mugs and plates were scattered across every available surface. There wasn't a crumb of lemon tart left anywhere.

I sat in a corner, watching, nursing a mug of tea and the cat. Gradually, they all went away. There would be questions and paperwork and explanations, but that was all for tomorrow.

Russell turned to Mrs Crisp. 'You gave them our pudding?'

She smiled slightly and patted her hair. 'Well, they're firemen.'

'Stop that at once,' he said. 'What sort of behaviour is that in front of two impressionable young people?'

The two impressionable young people grinned at him.

'And you two can pack that in, as well. What are you doing?'

Mrs Crisp had started to pile up plates and dishes. He took them from her, saying softly, 'Go to bed, Auntie Lizzie. We'll see to all this in the morning.'

She swallowed, and said, 'Oh ... Russell.'

He kissed her cheek. 'Off you go. And for God's sake, have a bit of a lie-in tomorrow. You deserve it. Now, I'm assuming you snagged yourself a couple of firemen and chained them to the walls with all your other lovers, so don't keep them waiting.'

She snorted.

'And keep the noise down in there,' he called after her.

She slammed her door.

'Kev, I'm sorry, I can't let you back into your room until we get the OK and I've no idea when that will be.'

'No problem, Mr Checkland. I'll sleep here, in front of the range. Just in case anyone ... comes back.'

I hadn't thought of that and looked at Russell in sudden alarm. He shook his head. 'If they've got any sense, Richard and Julia have got him out of the country by now. Sharon, it's really late. I'll get you a taxi.'

'No need,' she said, innocently. 'I'll stay too. Just in case. I'll curl up on the sofa.'

'You don't have to do that,' said my dense husband. 'There are spare rooms upstairs and -'

I kicked him under the table.

'- obviously you prefer to be down here in case of any emergency. Commendable ... dedication. Remind me to remember to pay you this month. Jenny, go to bed. You look dreadful.'

Glad to go, I said goodnight and departed for the longest and best bath of my life.

Emerging, pink and fluffy some considerable time later, I found Russell in T-shirt and shorts, sitting at the bottom of my bed, rubbing his hair dry.

He dropped the towel and looked at me for a very long time. My heart rate picked up.

Finally, he said, 'You told your aunt and uncle that I went like a train?'

Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't that.

'What?'

'You told them I went like a train. Do you even know what that means?'

‘Well, I heard someone say it once ...’

‘Not in connection with the Great Western Railway timetable, I’m thinking.’

‘Um ...’

‘And how would you know anyway?’

‘Well ...’

‘How can I possibly maintain my reputation as a sober married man and responsible member of the community when you’re dashing around telling everyone I go like a train?’

‘Um ... well, if you think it would help, I could tell everyone that on the contrary, you definitely *don’t* go like a train.’

He closed his eyes. ‘I never actually thought I’d have to say this, but Jenny – please stop talking.’

‘I was just trying to help.’

He shook his head. ‘Sometimes, I really don’t know what to do with you.’

‘Yes, you do.’

He smiled. ‘Yes, I do.’

He stood quickly, scooped me up in his arms, laid me carefully on the bed, and made slow love with such exquisite gentleness that I nearly fell apart.

Epilogue

I awoke very early. Even the birds weren't up yet. I turned my head on the pillow and smiled at the giant, golden horse standing in the corner, swishing his tail and filling the room with the scent of warm ginger biscuits.

'Hello, Jenny.'

'Hello, Thomas.'

'Come downstairs. Don't wake anyone.'

I disentangled myself gently from the randy octopus sleeping next to me, found some clothes, grabbed an old sweater of Russell's against the early morning chill, and quietly let myself out of the house.

He waited for me in the lane.

'Thomas.'

I put my arms around him. It was so wonderful to touch him again. He lowered his head and rested his forehead against mine. I lost myself in huge happiness. I stroked his cheek, arranged his mane, and tidied his forelock. He blew in my hair.

'Shall we walk a little?'

We set off in the dim, grey morning light. Somewhere in the trees, a bird started to sing. They'd all be at it soon, heralding the start of another long summer's day.

I put my hand on his neck as we walked. He didn't seem to mind.

'So, how are you, Jenny? What's been happening?'

Where to begin?

'Well, Russell is exactly the same. He's painting like a madman at the moment. A local gallery took some of his work, which was quite well received. Someone came down from London to see them. He sold one and got a commission and the local paper did a piece about him and he's putting together a body of work for an exhibition next year.'

'How's it going? Is it coming back to him?'

'He's struggling a little. His work is – different. I think he's making a mistake trying to capture his old style. He's not the same person he was then.'

'Is he happy?'

'He shouts a lot, so I think so.'

'What about Francesca?'

'Oh, you'll not believe this; she took a shine to Marilyn and offered to do a promotion for the local donkey centre. The press was there and she was photographed cuddling hugely photogenic baby donkeys. She was a massive hit and now does a lot of fund raising for them and donkeys in general. Tons of good publicity of course, which does her no harm at all, but I think she enjoys it. And, more surprise, she's very big in Spain.'

'What? Is it our revenge for the Armada?'

‘They love her over there. She’s always dashing off to do photo shoots and things. Daniel often goes out to join her.’

‘They’re still together, are they?’

‘Very much so.’ I paused. ‘A lot of people learned a lot that night. Oh, you’ll never guess – Mrs Crisp has a boyfriend.’

He stopped dead and I walked into him.

‘No!’ he said, as we sorted ourselves out.

‘Yes. It’s the assessor from the insurance company. He turned up to inspect the damage and assess the claim. He kept coming back with all these silly questions. Russell was going mad thinking they were trying to wriggle out of paying and was barely even civil to the poor man, and then it turned out that Mrs Crisp was the attraction. He can’t keep away. His name is Bill and he takes her out every Sunday. She stayed out overnight once and didn’t turn up until after breakfast the next morning and we all had to pretend she’d just overslept. Russell is worrying he’s going to have to do the “What are your intentions?” speech.’

‘Who’s “we all”?’

‘Well, Kevin’s still with us, but not for much longer. Sharon has seen suitable premises for her cup-cake shop, with living accommodation over the top. We loaned them a bit of money. No idea whether it will be a success or if Kevin will get a job after college, but they’re young. They’ll cope.’

‘Whereas you, of course, Jenny, are almost completely over the hill.’

‘I consider myself to have reached the age of mature reflection, if that’s what you mean.’

‘So, what else?’

‘You’re insatiable, aren’t you? Not a lot, really.’

He sighed. *‘I mean, Jenny, what about you?’*

‘Oh, me. Well, I’m in the process of selling the bookshop. A national chain, you know the one, has made me an offer I’m going to accept. And I did a bit of work with Daniel on his TV series. It was really interesting. I loved it. And we may do another about Queen Isabella. You know, The She Wolf of France. And I ride a lot.’ I paused. ‘Did you send him?’

‘Who?’

‘The other Thomas.’

‘Certainly not. How could I? I simply caused a few things to happen.’

I remembered Russell telling me about the mare I’d so nearly had. ‘But as soon as I saw this fellow, I knew he was the one for you ...’

‘And see how well it all turned out.’

By now, we were passing the Braithwaites’ farm. Martin stood by his back door, mug in hand. I waved.

The sun was coming up over the hill as we stepped out on to the moors. Another bright, golden day was being born. Although not as bright and golden as Thomas himself, looking down at me with love in his eyes.

‘So, what about you, Thomas? Are you well?’

'Of course.'

'And your little boy? Did he ...? Was he ...?'

'No.'

There was a world of pain in that short word.

I stopped.

'Oh, Thomas.'

He sighed. *'I did what I could. It wasn't enough. It's never enough. He was so small. But I was able to take away his pain and his fear at the end.'*

I felt my own eyes fill with tears. 'I'm so sorry.'

'It happens, Jenny. More often than I would like. There isn't usually a happy ending. In fact, I can only ever recall one.'

Poor, poor Thomas. Who gave his all. Every time. Who never stinted. And who almost always failed. I stood on tiptoe and kissed his forehead. 'It's good to see you. Why have you come?'

'I left you more suddenly than I wanted to. There were still things to say. And I missed you. And I thought you might like to see this.'

We started forwards again. I rested my hand on his shoulder, feeling his warmth and strength. Trying to find the courage to come out and say it ...

'Thomas, would you like ...?'

I stopped, suddenly. We breasted the top of the hill and there, spread over the valley before me – a whole herd of huge horses of every colour. Flashing chestnut, creamy white, glittering silver, rich dark brown. Beautiful horses. Beautiful, big, strong horses. Some stood in small groups with their heads close together; some grazed, one or two drank from the stream, some stood quietly and alone, perhaps quietly enjoying the early morning sun. A snatched moment of peace.

Above them all, on the hill, stood a solitary horse, far bigger than all the others, coal black, still and watchful. The King Horse.

But there was only one golden horse. My Thomas, standing quietly at my side, watching me watch them.

My heart swelled at the beauty and majesty of them.

'Thomas ...'

He said, *'This doesn't happen very often. I thought you might like to see it. You could call it a works outing, I suppose.'*

On the hill opposite, the black horse shook his head and stamped his foot. I felt the ground tremble.

'I must go.'

No, he mustn't ...

'Wait. Thomas, I wanted to say ... you don't have to be alone. Your little boy died and you're sad, but you don't have to be alone. Why don't you come and see me, just every now and then? When you need to talk. Or if you don't want to talk, if things have gone badly, just to be with a friend. I don't want to lose you. I hadn't realised, until I saw you again ... And I owe you so much. Let me repay a little. Please. Don't let this be the last time we see each other.'

I stretched out a hand to him.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Because you’re special.’

The King Horse shook his head again and trumpeted a call, long and clear. The horses lifted their heads. One or two began to move.

‘*I must go,*’ said Thomas again, still not moving.

I couldn’t let him just leave. Not again. Something was tearing inside me.

‘Please, Thomas, what do you say? Will you come and see me sometimes? You should have someone to talk to. You shouldn’t be alone.’

He thought about it for a very long time. My heart thumped. I couldn’t lose him again. I just couldn’t.

‘*I’d like that,*’ he said, softly. His eyes gleamed with the sudden mischief that brought back so many memories. ‘*I’ll come on special occasions – like the birth of your first child.*’

‘Oh. OK.’

If a horse could grin, he grinned. ‘*So that’s in just less than six months, then.*’

‘What? Thomas, wait ...’

But he was gone. He cantered gently down the slope and jumped the stream at the bottom as he had done before. And as he had done before, for a split second, he hung motionless in the air, a perfect arc, before galloping uphill to join his herd.

Now the other horses were moving after their leader. Moving as one, they wheeled around. Manes and tails streamed behind them like medieval banners. From a standing start, they moved to a full gallop, their necks outstretched, and powerful muscles bunching under their glossy coats. Full tilt, they thundered up the hill. A glorious sight that nearly stopped my heart in wonder. The ground shook under their hooves. One by one, they vanished. Gradually, the noise of thunder died away until just the early morning birdsong remained. That and the gentle breeze lifting my hair.

But, as he disappeared over the top of the hill, the last horse, the very last horse, the big, golden one, kicked up his heels for fun and the sheer joy of living.

And then they were gone.

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